MOONLIGHT

Book: 81

Nevaeh

Marcel Ray Duriez

PREFACE

During the winter when I was fourteen, my mother thought I was going dumb, probably because I seldom left the house, spent so much time in bed, read the same book repeatedly, did not eat much, and took me so much to do anything I did not want to do. Little by little all my free time is spent thinking about death. Whenever you read a brochure or website about mental

health or something else, they always list depression as a side effect of being hated. While in fact, depression is not a side effect of your surroundings. Depression is a side effect of death, you can say so, yet it is not.

School is also a side effect of death, and so are friendships. Everything. But my mom thought I needed treatment, so she took me to Dr. Paul, who agreed I was swimming in paralysis and clinical depression, so the medications had

to be adjusted, and I had to be in a Weekly Support Group The children in this support group you see every day at school are holes in the butt, featuring alternating characters in different states of mental distress is why the side effects are of death.

1 A Stalemate

Allow me to say this- existing as an idiot is no container of chocolate strawberries. Individuals chuckle, fail forbearance and dine you neglected. Currently, they say residents are supposed to be

considerate to the tormented, though allow me to tell you- it is not forever that method. So, I obtained no criticisms because I suspect I did live a fascinating life.

I have been an idiot since I was handled by my masters. My IQ is near 74 yet was not beforehand when I was a smaller child, (yet my mind comes and goes,) so I had never presented extensively considered to how I would pass, though I had preserved logic sufficiently in the last occasional months, even if I kept, I

would not carry out the pictured it like this.

This is the day my twin sister Nevaeh May was born on July 19, 1995. She had six sisters. I am known for her pigtails John Jackson pulled them in class and for being too shy and soft-spoken. Mr. Anderson takes the part of dad on the weekends. Is dating Nevaeh on and off as a 'that way' girl. Her hobbies include drawing, singing in her church's choir, and braiding her hair with ribbons that match her

outfits. picked on by J.A Cowering. I had a half-sister Sarah who died in 1997 when Lily was 2 years old. Her half-sister Ava was born on November 19, 2000, when Lily was 5 years old. Her sister Adriane was born in 2002 when Lily was 7 years old.

It is popular and I am not, end of the story there.

And being me, Lily is (Sped-ED!) the 'Individuals with Disabilities Education Act' girl. 'It's about the same as having a red, white and blue

dick shoved up your ass and saying you have freedom of choices.'

Then some names and faces have fewer thoughts than I, like Candy Sheldon, Elizabeth Smith, Megan Davis, Taylor Brown, Joseph Shaw, Kassie Row, and even the teacher Miss. Stackawitz is a distraction to her and picks on her daily saying names of slander.

I gazed without respiring across the long room, into the dark eyes of the hunter, and he looked pleasantly back at me.

It stood an acceptable way to pass, in the place of somebody else, somebody I treasured. Dignified. That ought to matter for something.

I understood that if I had never gone ahead to McCarthy, I would not be meeting extinction now. While frightened as I stood, I could not convey myself to rue the determination. When life offers you an aim so far exceeding any of your anticipations, it is not useful to sorrow when it reaches a stop.

The predator smiled pleasantly as he wandered onwards to annihilate me.

My eyesight extended to a glowing, white ray. I existed in an unknown room, a white chamber. The border beside me stood sheathed in extended-standing blinds; over my chairperson, the glaring sunlight overwhelmed me. I stood supported up on a tough, jagged mattress - a mattress with railings. The cushions were matte, clumpy, and wet. There was an aggravating beeping sound

someplace tight by. I expected that suggested I stood still happening. Cessation should not be this hurting.

My fingers were all knotted up with transparent conduits, and something was taped across my facade, underneath my nose. I lifted my writing to yank it off.

'Na, you don't.' And nippy fingers grabbed my hand.

'Melvin?' I angled my head barely, and his exquisite countenance was merely my hairsbreadths length from mine, his

chin catnapping on the periphery of my pad. I discovered furthermore that I stood alive, now, with appreciation and joy. 'Oh, Melvin, I'm so miserable!'

'Sh- h,' he silenced me. 'Everything's all good now.'

'What occurred?' I could not recall unquestionably, and my mind mutinied against me as I tried to recall.

'I was too delinquent. I could have existed too delinquent,'

he rumored, his spokesperson oppressed.

'I was so ridiculous, Melvin. I supposed he had my mother.'

'He fooled us all.'

'I need to call Charlie and my mother,' I discovered via the vapor.

'Naddalin Natalie called them, they were here - well, here in the infirmary. She is conveying something to swallow respectably currently.'

'She's here?' I tried to sit up, but the spinning in my skull revved, and his hand forced me gently down onto the cushions.

'She'll be back shortly,' he vowed. 'Nevertheless, you ought to stay motionless.'

'Despite what did you signify her?' I panicked. I had no welfare in my existing comfort. My mother was here, and I was recuperating from a predator invasion. 'Why did you inform her I'm here?'

'Lily, you fell down two breakouts of stairs and through a window at the high school.'

He remained. 'You have to recognize, it could transpire.'

I moaned, and it spoiled. I gazed down at my body beneath the sheet, the massive lump that was my leg, they were next needed to be amputated.

'How wrong am I?' I bid.

'You have a nonfunctional leg, four busted ribs, some fissures in

your skull, contusions wrapping every hairsbreadth of your skin, and you have yielded a lot of blood. They offered you a few transfusions. I did not like it - it caused your scent all sinful for a bit.'

'That must include living a pleasant transition for you.'

'Nope, I like how you scent.'

'How did you do it?' I asked quietly. He understood what I suggested earlier.

'I'm not sure.' He glanced away from my wondering looks, lifting my gauze-wrapped hand from the mattress and harboring it gently in his, cautious not to disrupt the wire tying me to one of the monitors.

I stayed patient for the holiday.

He laughed without replacing my watch. 'It was unthinkable... to control,' he gossiped. 'Unbelievable. But I carried it out.' He darted up eventually, with half a smile. 'I must adore you.'

'Don't I taste as pleasing as I scent?' I grinned in answer. That damaged my face.

'Even more useful - more reasonable than I'd envisioned.'

'I'm miserable,' I apologized.

He lifted his regards to the roof. 'Of all the something to apologize for.'

'What should I apologize for?'

'For exact almost carrying yourself out from me permanently.'

'I'm miserable,' I apologized similarly.

'I understand why you did it.' His representative was enjoyable. The clan of girls, like blackbirds. 'It stood still ludicrous, of class. You should have remained for me; you should have informed me.'

'You wouldn't keep letting me move.'

'Na,' he arranged harshly, 'I wouldn't.'

Some extremely unwelcome recollections were forming to come about me. I jerked and then winced.

He was at once worried. 'Lily, what's wrong?'

'What happened to Ava?'

'After I pulled her off you, Dejen and Jae took care of her.' There was a drastic note of shame in her representative.

This confused me. 'I didn't see Dejen and Jae there.'

'They had to escape space... there was a lot of blood.'

'But you survived.'

'Aye, I prevailed.'

'And Naddalin Natalie, and Melchor...' I said in amazement.

'They value you, similarly, you understand.'

A moment of heartbreaking photos from the last moment I noticed Naddalin Natalie reminded

me of something. 'Did Naddalin Natalie visit the video?' I questioned anxiously.

'Yes.' A new voice darkened his voice, a tone of hatred.

'She was always in the dark, that's why she didn't remember.'

'I know she's in now.' His voice was even, but his face was black with anger.

I tried to reach his face with my free hand, but something

stopped me. I looked down to see IV pulling my arm.

'Oh,' I winced.

'What is this?' He then asked anxiously - distracted, but not enough. The darkness did not completely leave his eyes.

'Needles,' I explained, looking at him from my hand. I focused on the curved ceiling tile and tried to breathe deeply despite the pain in my ribs.

'Afraid of needles,' he muttered to himself, shaking his head. 'Oh, a sad vampire, intending to kill her, sure enough, no problem, she ran to meet him. On the other hand, IV…' my eyes. I was glad to know that this reaction was at least pain-free. I decided to change the subject.

'Why did you come?' I asked.

At first, he stared at me, confused, and hurt to touch his eyes.

His cheeks scrunched up as he met his face. 'Do you want me to go?'

'No!' Shocked at the thought, I protested. 'No, I mean, why does mom think you are here? I need to get my story right before she comes back.'

'Oh,' he said, and his forehead went back to smooth marble. 'I came to Phoenix to talk some sense into you, to convince you to go back to the McAuley.' His wide eyes were so honest and sincere that I believed him myself. 'You agreed to

see me, and you went to the hotel where I was staying with Melchor and Naddalin Natalie - of course I was here under parental supervision,' he put in politely. Room and ... well, you know the rest. You do not need to remember any details, but you have a good excuse to ramble a bit about the finer points.

I thought about it for a moment. 'There are a few flaws with that story. Like unbroken windows.'

'Not really,' he said. 'Naddalin Natalie had a remarkably

interesting bit of creative evidence. Everything was taken very convincingly - you can sue the hotel if you want. You have nothing to worry about,' he promised me, caressing my cheek with light touches. 'Your only job now is to heal.'

I did not react to his touch because I was not too lost in the pain or the drug haze. The inspector's voice turned mischievously- now he was not the only one sensing my heart's misbehavior.

'That's embarrassing,' I said to myself.

He laughed, and a suspicious look came into his eyes. 'Hm, I wonder...'

He slowly leaned in; The sound of his screams got louder without his lips touching mine. But when they did, even with very gentle pressure, the sound stopped completely.

When the monitor reported my heart rate restarting, his anxiety

turned to relief and then suddenly backed off.

'Looks like I'll have to be more careful with you than usual.' He frowned.

'I haven't finished your name,' I said. 'Don't make me come there.'

He smiled and leaned down to lightly press his lips to mine. The supervisor went wild.

But then his lips twitched. He pulled away.

'I think I can hear your mother,' he said, smiling again.

'Don't leave me,' I cried, an irrational wave of panic flowing through me. I could not let him go - he might be gone from me again.

For a brief second, he read the terror in my eyes. 'I won't,' he promised sincerely and smiled. 'I'll take a nap,' he said, moving from the rigid plastic chair next to me to the turquoise faux-leather armchair under my bed, leaning back and

closing his eyes. He was perfectly still.

'Don't forget to breathe,' I said sarcastically. He took a deep breath, eyes still closed.

I could hear my mother now. She was talking to someone, a nurse, and seemed tired and upset. I jumped out of bed and ran to her, to reassure her, to promise that everything was fine. But I was in no shape to jump so I waited impatiently.

She peeked through the crack in the door.

'Mother!' Then at that moment, I whispered, my voice full of love and relief.

She took Melvin to the still-sitting chair and sat on the edge of my bed.

'He's not going, is he?' She muttered to herself.

'Mother, I'm so glad to see you!'

She slowly leaned down to hug me, and a warm tear rolled down my cheek.

'Lilla I was so angry!'

'I am sorry mom. But everything is fine now, it is okay,' I consoled her.

'I'm glad to see you finally open your eyes.' She sat on the edge of my bed.

I suddenly realized I had no idea when. 'How long have you been closed?'

'It is Friday, sir. You have been out for a while.'

'Friday?' I was shocked. I tried to remember when...but I did not want to think about it.

'They had to calm down for a while, honey - you've been hurt a lot.'

'I know.' I could feel it.

'So- o, like you are lucky Dr. Shezor was there. He is a genuinely nice man...even though he is

incredibly young. And he looks more like a model than a doctor...'

'Did you meet Melchor?'

'And Melvin's sister Naddalin Natalie is a beautiful girl.'

'She is,' I agreed wholeheartedly.

She lay in the chair with her eyes closed and looked over her shoulder at Melvin. 'You didn't tell me you had such good friends in McAuley.'

I cringed and then cried.

'What hurts?' she asked anxiously looking back at me. Melvin's eyes flashed into my face.

'It's fine,' I told them. 'I just have to remember not to move.' He fell back into a ludicrous slumber.

I took advantage of my mother's temporary distraction to keep the subject from returning to my vague behavior. 'Where's Phil?' I quickly asked him.

'California - Oh, Lilla! You will never guess! Just as we are about to leave, great news!'

'Is Deann signed?' I guessed.

'Yes! How did you guess! The suns, can you believe it?'

'That's great, Mom,' I said with all the excitement I could manage, though I had little idea what that meant.

'Yes.' A new voice obscured his voice, a tone of hatred.

'She was always in the dark, that's why she didn't know anymore.'

'I know she's in now.' His voice was even, but his face was black with anger.

I tried to reach his face with my free hand, but something stopped me. I looked down and saw IV pulling on my arm.

'Oh,' I shivered.

'What is this, I could not remember asking from the last time I did...' He asked anxiously, distracted, but not enough. The darkness did not leave his eyes.

'Needles,' I explained, looking at him from my hand. I focused on the curved ceiling tile and tried to take a deep breath despite the pain in my ribs.

'Afraid of needles,' he muttered to himself, shaking his head. 'Oh, a sad vampire, who planned to kill her, sure enough, no problem, she ran to meet him. On the other hand, IV...'

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'Oh,' he said, and his forehead turned back to smooth marble. 'I came to Phoenix to teach you some sense, to convince you to go back to the fork.' His big eyes were so honest and sincere that I believed him myself. 'You agreed to see me, and you went to the hotel where I was staying with Melchor and Naddalin Natalie - of course I was here under parental supervision,' he added politely. Room and... Well, you know the rest. You do not have to memorize details, but

you have a good excuse to talk about the finer points.

I thought about it for a while. 'There are a few flaws to that story. Like unbroken windows that are still there now, and ones that look like they have been done not by a girl of your size or power.'

'Not really,' he said. 'Naddalin Natalie had a remarkably interesting piece of creative evidence. Everything was taken very convincingly - you can sue the hotel if you want. You do not have to worry

about anything,' he promised me, stroking my cheek with light touches. 'Your only job now is to heal.'

I did not respond to his touch because I was not too lost in the pain or haze of the drugs. The inspector's voice grew mischievous- now he was not the only one to feel the misbehavior of my heart.

'That's embarrassing,' I said to myself.

He laughed and a suspicious look came into his eyes. 'Hm, I wonder…'

He leaned forward slowly; The sound of his screams grew louder without his lips touching mine. But when they did, even with very gentle pressure, the sound stopped completely.

When the monitor reported that my heartbeat started again, his fear turned to relief, and he suddenly fell back.

'Looks like I need to be more careful with you than usual.' He frowned.

'I haven't finished your name yet,' I said. 'Don't let me get there.'

He smiled and leaned forward to press his lips gently against mine. The attendant let go.

But then his lips trembled. He pulled away.

'I think I can hear your mother,' he said, smiling again.

'Don't leave me,' I yelled, as an irrational wave of panic swept

through me. I could not let him go - he would be away from me again.

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Then he said, moving from the rigid plastic chair next to me to the turquoise leatherette armchair under my bed, leaning back and closing his eyes. He was dead silent.

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'Ah mother!' I whispered, my voice full of love and relief.

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I took advantage of my mother's temporary distraction to keep the subject from returning to my vague demeanor. 'Where's Phil?' I asked him quickly.

'California - Oh, Lilla! You will never guess! Just as we are about to leave, great news!'

'Is Deann signed aging saying she is going to be next to braindead?' I suspected.

'Yes! How do you guess? The suns, can you believe it?'

'That's great, Mom,' I said with all the excitement I could handle, though I had no idea what that meant.

'And you love Los Altos Hills,' she teased as I stared blankly at her. 'I was a little concerned when Deann started talking about Akron, the snow, and everything because you know how much I hate the cold, but now Los Altos Hills! It is always sunny, and the humidity is not too

bad. We get it. The prettiest house, with a green and white trim, and just like an old movie theater porch, and this big oak tree, and it is only a few minutes from the ocean, and you have your bathroom…

'Wait, Mom!' I cut him off. Melvin still had his eyes closed, but he looked too tired to sleep through. 'What are you talking about? I am not going to California. I live in McAuley.'

'But you don't have to do that anymore, fool,' she laughed.

'Deann can be so much now… we have talked a lot, and what I do is trade at home. Games, half with you, half with him.'

'Mom.' I hesitated, wondering how to be diplomatic about this 'I want to live in McAuley. I am in school, and I have two girlfriends' - she looked at Melvin again as I remembered friends, so I tried another direction - 'and Charlie wants me. He is all alone there, and he cannot cook at all.

'Would you like to stay in McAuley?' She was confused. The thought was unthinkable to her. And then her eyes returned to Melvin. 'How?'

'I told you - school, Charlie - oh!' I shrugged. Not a clever idea.

Her hands trembled helplessly over me, a safe place. Trying to find it. She grabbed my forehead; it was unsealed.

'Lilla, honey, you hate McAuley…'

'It's not that bad.'

I closed her eyes for her with my hands…

Nevertheless, and looked back and forth between me and Melvin, this time she got excited.

'Is this a boy?' she whispered.

I opened my mouth to lie, but her eyes searched my face, and I knew she could see it.

'He's a part,' I said. No need to confess how big the part

was. 'So, you had a chance to talk to Melvin?' I asked.

'Yes.' She hesitated, looking at his perfect still form. 'And that's what I want to talk to you about.'

Oh, 'about what?' I asked.

'Boy loves you,' she accused, lowering her voice.

'I think so,' I said.

'And about How does he feel?' she hid the curiosity in her voice well

I sighed and looked away as much as I loved my mother this was not a conversation I wanted to have with her Rum 'I love him so much' That sounds like something a teenage girl would say to her first boyfriend, 'Well, he looks great, and my goodness, he's unbelievably handsome, but you're so young, Lilla...' Her voice sounded uncertain; As far as I can remember, this is the first time since I was eight years old, she tried to act as a parental authority figure. From my

conversations with her about men, I sensed a reasonable, but strong tone.

'I know, Mom, don't worry, it's just love,' I told her.

'That's right,' she agreed, just amused.

Then she sighed guiltily over her shoulder at the big round clock on the wall.

'Do you have to go?'

She bit her lip. 'Movie should have called a little later... I did not know you would wake up...'

'No problem mom' I tried to soften relief not to hurt her. 'I won't be alone.'

'I'll be back soon, I slept here, you know,' she said proudly.

'Oh, mother, you do not have to! You can sleep at home - I will never notice.' The whirl of painkillers in my brain made it hard to concentrate now, but I had been asleep for days.

'I was so scared,' Lamb admits. 'There's some crime in the area and I don't like being alone.'

'A crime?' I called.

'Someone broke into the dance studio around the corner from the house, burned it to the ground - nothing more! And left them a stolen car. Remember when you danced there, honey?'

'I remember.' I shook and shook.

'I can stay if you want me, honey.'

'No mom, it'll be fine, Melvin will be with me.'

That is why she wanted to stay. 'I'll be back tonight.' It sounded like a warning, like a promise, and she looked back at Melvin as she said it.

'I love you mom'

'I love you too Lilla. Try to be more careful when you walk baby, I do not want to lose you.'

Melvin's eyes remained closed, but a wide smile appeared on his face.

A nurse came in to check all my hoses and wires. My mother kissed my forehead, touched my bandaged hand, and left.

The nurse checked the paper readings on my heart monitor.

'Feel stressed honey? Your heart rate is a little high there.'

'I'm fine,' I told her.

'I'll tell your nursing staff when you wake up, she should see you soon.'

As soon as she closed the door, Melvin was by my side.

'Did you steal a car?' I raised my eyebrows.

He smiled; he had no remorse. 'It was a good car, very fast.'

'How did you sleep?' I asked.

'Interesting.' His eyes narrowed.

'What?'

He looked down when he answered. 'I wonder. California … and your mother… well, I thought you wanted it.'

I stared at him blankly. 'But in California, you are inside all day. Like a real vampire, you only go out at night.'

He almost smiled, but not quite. Then his face was serious. 'I am staying in McAuley, Lilla. Or somewhere else,' he explained. 'Where I Can't Hurt You Anymore'

did not get through to me at first. I just kept staring as the words entered my head one by one like a terrible puzzle. I did not realize my heart was pounding, but as my breath became a powerful gasp, I was aware of the sharp pain in my ribs increasing my resistance.

He said nothing; He looked intently at my face as the pain, which had nothing to do with broken bones, threatened to crush me, an infinitely worse pain.

And then another nurse purposely walked into the room. Melvin sat rock solid as she took in my expression with a trained eye before turning to the monitors.

'Time for more painkillers, honey?' she asked politely, touching the IV.

'No, no,' I said, trying to keep the pain out of my voice. 'I do not need anything.' I cannot close my eyes now.

'You do not have to be brave, honey. You cannot worry too

much; you need to rest.' She waited but I just nodded.

'Okay,' she sighed. 'When you're done, hit the call button.'

She gave Melvin a pinched look, then gave him another concerned look at the machine before walking away.

His cool hands lay on my face; I stared at him with wild eyes.

'Sh- h, Lilla, calm down.'

'Don't leave me,' I begged in a broken voice.

'I won't,' he promised. 'Calm down before I call the nurse to relieve you.'

But my heart could not cool down.

'Lilla,' he stroked my face. 'I am going nowhere. I will be here if you need me.'

'Will you swear you won't leave me?' I whispered. At least I tried to control my breathing. My ribs were banging.

He put his hands on either side of my face and brought his face closer to mine. His eyes were big and serious. 'I swear.'

The smell of his breath was soothing. I thought it would relieve my shortness of breath. He continued to hold my gaze as my body slowly relaxed and his voice returned to normal. His eyes grew darker, closer to black than gold these days.

'Is it better than?' At that moment in time, he asked.

'Yes,' I said cautiously.

He shook his head and muttered something unintelligible. I chose the term 'overreaction'.

'Why did you say that?' I whispered, trying not to shake my voice. 'Tired of saving me all the time? Do you want me to go?'

'No, I do not want to be without you, Lilla, of course not. Be reasonable. And I would not have a problem saving you - if it were not for the fact that I was the one who put you in danger. The reason you

are here is that I am here.' So, because I am alive.'

'Barely.' His voice was just a whisper. 'Covered with gas and plaster and difficult to move.'

'I'm not talking about my recent death experience,' I said angrily. others - you can take your pick. Without you, I would be lost in the McAuley of the Northern End Graveyard, like my look- a- like sister Sara.'

He shivered at my words, but the tortured look did not leave his eyes.

'But that's not the worst,' he whispered. 'When I saw you lying there on the floor...broken and broken.' His voice was choking. 'I did not think I was late; I did not even hear you scream in pain - all those excruciating memories I will carry with me forever. No, I felt the worst… knowing I could not stop. Assuming I would kill you myself.

But you did not.

'I could get it. So easy.'

I knew I had to calm down... but he tried to persuade himself to leave me, and panic swept through my lungs, trying to get out

'Promise me,' I whispered.

'What?'

'You know 'Now I am starting to get angry. He was too stubborn to dwell on the negative.

He heard the change in my voice. His eyes narrowed. 'I don't think I'm strong enough to get away

from you stay, so you'll have your way... kill or not,' he added angrily.

'Nice.' But he did not promise- a fact I have not forgotten. The shock was minor; I had no strength to control his anger. 'He told me how you stopped... now I want to know why,' I said.

'Why?' Then he repeated gravely.

'Why did you do it? Why did you say 'Don't let the poison spread? Now I would be just like you.'

Melvin's eyes went flat black, and I remembered this was something he never wanted me to know Naddalin Natalie must have been too concerned about what she had learned about herself...or she was too careful with the ideas around her to tell me about the mechanics of vampire transformations. He was surprised and angry. His nose flared up and his mouth looked like it had been split from stone.

He would not answer that much was clear.

'I'll be the first to admit that I have no experience with relationships,' I said. 'But it just seems logical… a man and a woman should be equal to some degree… as if one of them cannot always intervene and can save the other. They should protect each other equally.'

He folded his arms by my bed and rested his chin on his hands. His expression softened; his anger intense. He decided he would not be mad at me. I hoped to get a chance'

'You saved me,' he said softly.

'I can't always be Joyce Dunn,' I said. 'I want to be Superman too.'

You do not know what you are asking for.' His voice was soft; He looked intently at the edge of the pillowcase.

'And you really like Los Altos Hills,' she teased as I looked at her blankly. 'I was a little worried when Deann started talking about Akron, the snow and everything,

because you know how I hate the cold, but now Los Altos Hills! It is always sunny, and the humidity is not too bad. We got it. The nicest house, with green, white trim, and just Like an old movie porch, and this big oak tree, and it is only minutes from the ocean, and you will have your own bathroom…'

'Wait, Mom!' I cut him off. Melvin still had his eyes closed, but he looked too tired to pass sleep. 'What are you talking about? I am not

going to California. I live in McAuley, not a rich town to say the least.'

'But you don't have to anymore, silly,' she laughed. 'Deann can be so much now... we've talked about it a lot, and what I do is trade at the home games, half time with you, half time with him.'

'Mom.' I hesitated, wondering how to be diplomatic about this. 'I want to live in McAuley. I sit in school, and I have two girlfriends' - she looked at Melvin again as I remembered friends, so I

tried another direction - 'and Charlie wants me. He is all alone there, and he cannot cook at all.

'You want to stay in McAuley?' She was confused. The thought was unthinkable to her. And then her eyes returned to Melvin. 'How?'

'I told you- school, Charlie- oh!' I shrugged. Not a clever idea.

Her hands were shaking helplessly over me, a safe place. trying to find it. She cupped my forehead; it was unsealed.

'Lilla, honey, you hate McAuley,' she said.

'It's not too bad.'

She closed her eyes and looked back and forth between me and Melvin, this time becoming overly excited.

'Is this a boy?' She whispered.

I opened my mouth to lie, but her eyes were searching for my face, and I knew she could see it.

'He's a part,' I said. No need to confess how big a part it was. 'So, you had a chance to talk to Melvin?' I asked.

'Yes.' She hesitated, looking at his perfect still form. 'And I want to talk to you about this.'

Oh, 'about what?' I asked.

'Boy loves you,' she accused, lowering her voice.

'I think so, too,' I said.

'And about How does he feel?' she hid the curiosity in her voice well.

I sighed, looking away. As much as I loved my mother, this was not a conversation I wanted to have with her. Rum. 'I'm so crazy about him.' There - sounds like something a teenage girl would say to her first boyfriend.

'Well, he looks great, and, my goodness, he's incredibly good-looking, but you're so young, Lilla...' Her voice was uncertain; As far as I

can remember, this is the first time since I was eight years old that she tried to act like a parental authority figure. From my conversations with her about men, I sensed a reasonable- yet- strong tone of voice.

'I know, mom, don't worry about it, it's just love,' I told her.

'That's right,' she agreed, simply amused.

Then she sighed guiltily over her shoulder at the large round clock on the wall.

'Do you have to go?'

She bit her lip. 'The film should have been called a little later... I did not know you were going to wake up...'

'No problem mom' I tried to soften the relief so as not to hurt her feelings. 'I will not be alone.'

'I'll be back soon, I've been sleeping here, you know,' she said proudly.

'Oh, mother, you do not have to do that! You can sleep at

home- I will never notice.' The swirl of painkillers in my brain was making it hard to concentrate now, but I had been asleep for days.

'I was so scared,' Lamb admits. 'There's been some crime in the area, and I don't like being alone.'

'A crime?' I called.

'Someone broke into the dance studio around the corner from the house, burned it to the ground - nothing left! And left a stolen car in

front of them. Do you remember dancing there, honey?'

'I remember.' I shook and shook.

'I can stay if you want me, baby.'

'No mom I'll be fine Melvin will be with me.'

That is why she wanted to stay. 'I'll be back tonight.' It sounded like a warning, like a promise, and she looked at Melvin again as she said it.

'I love you mom'

'I love you too Lilla. Try to be more careful when you walk honey, I do not want to lose you.'

Melvin's eyes remained closed, but a wide smile appeared on his face.

A nurse came in to check all my tubes and wires. My mother kissed my forehead, touched my bandaged hand, and left.

The nurse was checking the paper readings on my heart monitor.

'Are you feeling stressed honey? Your heart rate is a little high there.'

- 'I'm fine,' I told her.

- 'I'll tell your RN when you wake up, she should see you in a minute.'

As soon as she closed the door, Melvin was by my side.

'Did you steal a car?' I raised my eyebrows.

He smiled; he did not repent. 'It was a good car, very fast.'

'How was your sleep?' I asked.

'Interesting.' His eyes narrowed.

'What…?'

He looked down as he answered. 'I wonder. California ...and your mother...well, I thought you wanted it.'

I stared blankly at him. 'But in California, you are stuck inside all day. Like a real vampire, you only come out at night.'

He almost smiled, but not quite. Then his face was serious. 'I will be staying in McAuley, Lilla. Or somewhere like that,' he explained. 'Where I Can't Hurt You Anymore'

Like it did not sink in at first. I just kept staring as the words entered my head one by one like a horrible puzzle. Little did I know that my heart was racing, but as my breathing became a forceful gasp of air, I was aware of the sharp pain in my ribs that raised my resistance.

He said nothing; He looked intently at my face as the pain, which had nothing to do with broken bones, threatened to crush me, an infinitely worse pain.

…And then another nurse walked purposefully into the room. Melvin sat as stone as she took in my expression with a practiced eye before turning to the monitors.

'Time for more pain meds, dear?' she asked politely, touching the IV food.

'No, no,' I said, trying to keep the pain out of my voice. 'I don't need anything.' I cannot close my eyes now.

'You do not need to be brave, honey. You better not worry too much; you need to rest.' She waited but I just nodded my head.

'Okay,' she sighed. 'When you're ready, press the call button.'

She gave Melvin a narrow look and shot him one more worried look at the machine before walking away.

His cool hands were on my face; I stared at him with wild eyes.

'Sh- h, Lilla, calm down.'

'Don't leave me,' I begged in a broken voice.

'I won't,' he promised. 'Now relax before I call the nurse to relieve you.'

But my heart could not cool down.

'Lilla,' he caressed my face. 'I am not going anywhere. I will be here if you need me.'

'Will you swear you won't leave me?' I whispered. At least I tried to control my breathing. My ribs were pounding.

He put his hands on both sides of my face and brought his face closer to mine. His eyes were wide and serious. 'I swear.'

The smell of his breath was soothing. I thought it would ease my shortness of breath. He continued to hold my gaze as my body slowly relaxed and his voice returned to its

normal pace. His eyes darkened, closer to black than gold today.

'Now you're better than?' he asked.

'Yes,' I said cautiously.

He shook his head and mumbled something unintelligible. I chose the term 'overreaction'.

'Why did you say that?' I whispered, trying to keep my voice from shaking. 'Are you tired of saving me all the time? You want me to go?'

'No, I do not want to be without you, Lilla, of course not. Be reasonable. And I would have no problem saving you- if it were not for the fact that I was the one who put you in danger. The reason you are here is that I am here.' Cause- alive.'

'Barely.' His voice was only a whisper. 'Covered with gas and plaster and difficult to move.'

'I'm not referring to my recent death experience,' I said angrily. 'I was thinking of others... you can take your pick. If it were not

for you, I would be lost in McAuley Cemetery.'

He winced at my words, but the tortured look did not leave his eyes.

'But that's not the worst part,' he whispered. He pretended not to. 'When I saw you there on the floor...broken and broken.' His voice was choking. 'I did not think I was too late; I did not even hear you scream in pain - all those unbearable memories I will carry with me forever. No, I felt the worst ...

knowing that I could not stop. Believing I was going to kill you myself.

But you did not.

'I could get it. So easily.'

I knew I had to calm down... but he was trying to talk himself into leaving me, and the panic rattled through my lungs, trying to get out.

'Promise me,' I whispered.

'What?'

'When someone wants to kill you, you're brave as a lion - and then when someone mentions dancing...' He shook his head.

I gulped.

2 FIRST LOOK

My mom forced me to the train station with the windows all the way up in the car, and the heater would not work. It was five degrees in Pittsburgh and the atmosphere was perfectly melancholic and full of clouds. This next trip was after a long plane ride, and the frosty crystal

hung in the air, I was wearing my favorite shirt - sleeveless even if it was so cold it did not feel that way, white lace with eyelets; I wore it as a sign of farewell. My carry-on was a backpack with a cat on it, that had been passed down from my sisters.

On the farmland in the state of Pennsylvania, a small town named McAuley exists under constant cloud cover just like Pittsburgh, yet without human life, running around. This unimportant city receives more sown than any other place in the United

States, or so I feel. From this municipality and its dark and omnipresent shadow, my mother fled with me when I was only a few months old. In this municipality, I had been obliged to spend a month every summer until the age of thirteen. This was the year I finally started; Instead, for the past three summers, my dad Charlie has taken me to California for a two-week vacation, at the park with the mouse, like I was five or something.

I have now exiled myself to McAuley, an act I took with great horror. I hated McAuley. I loved the phoenix I loved the sun and the scorching heat. I loved the lively and sprawling city more than nothing but windmills and corn and wheat fields.

'Lilla,' my mom said to me - the last of a thousand times - before I got on the train. 'You don't have to do this.'

My mom glimpses me except for the long hair and the laugh lines. I felt spasms of panic as I

stared into her large childish eyes. How could I leave my loving, unpredictable, crazy mother alone? Sure, she had Deann now, so the bills would be paid, there would be food in the fridge, gas in her car, and someone to call if she got lost, but still…

' I want to go,' I lied. I had always been a bad liar, but I had told that lie so many times lately that it almost sounded convincing now

'Tell Charlie I said hello.'

'I will do it.'

'See you soon,' she insisted. 'You can come home anytime you want - I'll be back whenever you need me.'

Whereas I could see the sacrifice in his eyes behind the promise.

'Don't worry about me,' I urged him. 'It is going to be awesome. Love you, mom.'

She hugged me tightly for a minute, then I got on the steam train, and she was off.

It is around a four-hour ride from Pittsburgh to the neutral zone I was going to be dumped on, another hour in a small car to fields and a home next to yet even more railways, then an hour drive to McAuley I do not mind flying, the hour in the car with Charlie did worry me a bit though. I was nice about the whole thing. He seemed genuinely pleased that, for the first time, I was living with him indefinitely. He had already enrolled me in high school and wanted to help me find a car.

But with Charlie, it would certainly be awkward. Neither of us was what anyone would consider wordy, and I still did not know what to say. I knew he was more than a little confused by my decision- Like my mother before me, I had made no secret of my dislike of McAuley.

It was raining when I landed in Big Sur. I did not see it as an omen - just inevitable. I had already said goodbye to the sun, and vitality.

Charlie was waiting for me in the plow car when he is not the only town authority.

I expected that too. Charlie is the Natalie-Black Police Chief for the good folks of McAuley. My main motivation for buying a car, despite the scarcity of funds, was that I refused to be driven around town in a car with red and blue lights on the roof. Nothing slows down traffic better than an officer.

Charlie awkwardly hugged me with one arm as I stumbled out of the plane.

'Nice to see you, Bellas,' he said smiling as he caught me and automatically supported me.

'You have not changed much. How's Allison?'

'Mom is fine. Nice to see you too, dad. Most of my sundresses were too shabby- and trashy for this town stuck in the past. My mom and I had pooled our resources to complete my winter wardrobe, but it

was still sparse. Everything fits easily in the cruiser's trunk.'

I got you a good car, cheap,' he announced once we were locked in.

'What type of car?' I was suspicious of the way he said, 'good car for you' as opposed to just 'good car'.

'Well, it's actually a Bellair, a 57 Chevy.' I was given the car, and the home, as you know your grandmother passed last year, and never did get over the death of

Chiaz. So, I was given a family home, to look after, not much of a home, is it?

'Where did you get it?'

'Remember Old man Black in had it locked in his barn?' No. I plan to pass it down the line, that is what your grandmother wanted, and your sister, whom I will not even say her name, is still hospitalized for being mental.

'He used to take us fishing in the summer with this car,' Charlie said.

That would explain why I did not remember him. I am good at banishing Ch painful and useless dares of my mind.

'He's in a wheelchair now,' Charlie continued as I did not answer, 'he could not drive anymore, and he is offered to give it to the grandkids for me to give to you and the girls.

'The was the question he hoped I would not ask.

'Well, it was your Sistare of all people who has done a lot of work

on the engine - it's really only a year ago, before her relapse.'

I hoped he did not think so little of me that he thought I would give up so easily. 'When did he accept it?'

'He bought it in 1957, I think.'

'Did he buy it new?

'Well yes. It was new in the early '57s- or late '58s at the earliest,' he admitted sheepishly. I know nothing about cars. I could not

fix it if something went wrong, and I could not afford a mechanic…'

'Really, Lilla, it is going well. They do not build them anymore. like this.'

This thing, I thought…it had possibilities - at least as an alias.

'How cheap is cheap of even free- it was free?' That was the part I could not compromise on '

Well, darling, I already bought it for you. As a homecoming

gift. Charlie looked at me sideways with a hopeful expression.

Wow. Complimentary. 'It wasn't necessary, Dad.'

I do not mind. I want you to be happy here. He was staring straight ahead as he said that. Charlie was not comfortable expressing his feelings aloud. I inherited that from him. So, I looked straight ahead as I replied,

'That's nice, Dad. Thanks. It is impossible to be happy in McAuley. He did not have to suffer with me.

And I have never looked a vacant car in the mouth - or the engine.

'Well, you're welcome,' he muttered, embarrassed by my thanks.

We exchanged a few more comments about the weather being wet and that was about it for conversation. We stared out the windows in silence.

It was beautiful, of course; I could not deny it. Everything was no longer leafy- the trees, their trunks covered with frost, their branches

hanging from them like a canopy with dripping masses of snow, the ground covered with ferns that looked glassy. Even the air was seeping cold and like cessation through the left behind leaves.

It was too overgrown - an alien world.

Eventually, we made it to Charlie. He still lived in the small two-bedroom house he and my mother bought when they first got married. These were the only days of their marriage - the first. There,

parked on the street in front of the house that did not change, was my new well, new to me- car. It was a faded blue color, with large, rounded fenders and a bulbous cabin. To my surprise, I loved it. I did not know if it would work, but I could see myself in it. Also, it was one of those solid pieces of iron that never gets damaged - the kind you see at an accident scene that does not scratch the paint surrounded by bits of the alien car that wrecked it...

'Wow dad, I love that! Thanks! Now my awful day tomorrow would be just as less awful. I would have no choice between walking the three kilometers to school in the rain or agreeing to take a ride in the chief's car.

'I'm glad you like it,' Charlie said gruffly, apologetic again.

It only took one ride to get all my possessions upstairs. I had the west room which faced the front yard next to an old tree, and a gaping hole in the ground that was linked by a

railroad massively long and stupidly tall steel rusty truss viaduct that looks as if it is about to fall any day now, and the railroad tracks are the only thing holding it up. The room was familiar; it has been mine since I was born. The wooden floor, the light blue walls, the tapered ceiling, the cream lace curtains around the windows - all this belonged to my childhood. The only changes Charlie ever made were swapping out the crib for a bed and adding a desk as I grew. A used computer now lay on

the desk, and the modem's phone line was piled on the floor to the nearest phone jack. It was a requirement from my mother so that we could easily stay connected. The rocking chair from when I was a baby was still around.

There was only a small bathroom up the stairs that I had to share with Charlie. I tried not to stress this fact too much.

One of the most reasonable things about Charlie is that he does not levitate over me.

He let me unpack and settle in, which would have been completely impossible for my mother. It was nice to be alone, to not have to smile and look happy; a relief to look out the window at the pouring rain and only shed a few tears. I was in no mood to go to an actual wine bar. Saved this for bedtime when I had to think about tomorrow.

McAuley High School had a staggering enrollment of only fifty-seven- now fifty-eight- students; In my junior class at home alone, there

were over seven hundred people. All the children here had grown up together - their grandparents were toddlers together.

I would be the big city's new girl, an oddity, a freak. Maybe if I looked like a Phoenix girl, I could enjoy it. But physically, I would not go anywhere. I should be tanned, athletic, blonde a softball player, or a cheerleader- all things that come with life in the Valley of the Sun.

Instead, despite the constant sun, I had ivory skin without

the excuse of having blue eyes or red hair. I have always been thin but gentle, obviously not an athlete; I lacked the hand-eye coordination to exercise without humiliating myself and hurting myself and anyone who got too close.

When I devoured placing my clothes away in the ancient wicker dresser, I grabbed my bag of toiletries and headed to the shared bathroom to clean up after the day's travels. I studied my face in the mirror while stroking my disheveled,

damp hair. It may have been the light, but I already looked pale, and unhealthy. My skin could be pretty - it was noticeably clear, almost sheer - but it all depended on the color. I had no color here.

As I faced my pale reflection in the mirror, I had to admit that I was lying to myself. Not only physically, but I also would never fit in. And if I could not find a niche in a school of three thousand people, what opportunity would I have here?

I did not have good relationships with people my age. The truth was that I did not get along well with people, period. Even my mother, to whom I was closer than anyone on this planet, was never in tune with me, never exactly in agreement. Sometimes I wondered if I was seeing the same things through my eyes that the rest of the world was seeing through theirs. There was a bug in my brain. But the reason did not matter. The only thing that mattered was the effect. And

tomorrow would only be the beginning.

I did not sleep well that night even after I stopped crying. The constant rush of rain and wind on the roof would not take up space. I pulled the faded old blanket over my head and later added the pillow as well. Whereas I could not fall asleep until after midnight when the rain, snow, and wind finally turned into a more peaceful downpour.

A thick haze was all I could see out the window in the morning

and I felt the claustrophobia welling up inside me. You could never see the sky here; it was like an enclosure.

Breakfast with Charle was a quiet occurrence, yet so was staying over at Mr. Anderson's home on the weekends, is why I have become the girl that was legally adopted by this man as Lily Anderson, AKA 'Little Miss Anderson' as some call me, yet I get both names. He wished me good luck in school. I thanked him, knowing full well that his hope was

in vain. Serendipity tended to avoid me. Charlie went to the police station first, where his wife and family were. Behind her left, I sat down on one of three unsuitable chairs at the old square oak table and scrutinized his small kitchen with its dark paneled walls, pale blond cabinets, and dark wood floor. Nothing has changed. My mother had painted the cupboards eighteen years ago to bring some sunshine into the house.

A series of pictures hung above the small fireplace in the

adjoining family room the size of a handkerchief. First a wedding photo of Charlie and my mother in Venice, then one of the three of us in the hospital after I was born with all my sisters, taken by a helpful nurse, followed by the procession of my school photos to the last year. It was embarrassing to look at the cheeks of baby hood still out for the world to see- I had to see what I could do to get Charlie to put her somewhere else, at least while I was living here.

It was impossible not to see in this house that Charlie had never gotten over my mother. I was uncomfortable.

I did not want to be early for school, but I could not stay home anymore. I put on my jacket - which looked like a biohazard suit - and headed out into the showers.

It was still drizzling with a mix of snow, not enough to soak me right away as I grabbed the house key, under the doormat which was still hidden and locked under the

eaves near the door. The sloshing of my new waterproof boots was nerve-wracking. I missed the normal gravel crunch while walking. I could not stop and admire my car like I wanted to; I could not wait to get out of the damp murk swirling around my head and clinging to my hair underneath my hood.

It was optimistic and dry in the car. Granddad or Charlie had cleaned it up. It was like new, but the spotty-colored upholstered seats still smelled faintly of peppermint

tobacco, old rotten gasoline, and feminine products. To my relief, the engine started quickly but noisily, roaring then idling at maximum volume. Well, a car this old had to have a flaw. The antique radio worked, a plus I did not expect.

Seeing the school was not difficult, it was up on this hill, even though I had never been there. School, like most other things, was right on the edge of the hill. It was not obvious that it was a school; only the sign that said it was McAuley

High School made me stop. It looked like a group of related brown brick houses. There were so many trees and bushes that I could not tell their size at first. What was the meaning of the institution? I wondered wistfully. Where were the chain-link fences, the metal sensors?

I parked in front of the first towering part of it, which had a small sign above the door that said Reception. Nobody else was parked there, so I was sure it was illegal, but I decided to head inside instead of

driving around in the rain like an idiot. I reluctantly got out of the grilled taxi and walked down a small stone path lined with dark hedges.

I took a serious breath before opening the door. The interior was very bright and warmer than I had hoped. The office was small; a small waiting room with padded folding chairs, an orange flecked advertising carpet, posters and awards on the walls, and a large ticking clock. Plants were growing all over the place in big plastic pots as if

there was not enough greenery inside. The room was divided in two by a long counter stuffed with wire baskets filled with papers and colorful flyers taped to the front. Behind the counter were three desks, one of which was occupied by a tall woman with red hair and glasses. She was wearing a purple T-shirt, which at once made me feel overdressed.

The blond-haired person-haired woman looked up. 'Can I help you?'

'I'm Lill Natalie-Black,' I informed her, seeing the instant realization in her eyes. I was expected to be, no doubt, a subject of gossip. The daughter of the Chief's fugitive ex-wife came home.

'Of course,' she declared. She rummaged through an uncertain pile of documents on her desk until she found the ones she was looking for. 'I have your timetable here and a map of the school.' She brought several sheets to the counter to show the eggs.

She walked through my classes for me, marking the best route to each on the map and giving me a slip of paper to mark each teacher to bring back at the end of the day. She smiled at me and hoped, like Charlie, that I would like to be here in McAuley. I smile back at him in the most convincing way possible.

As I walked back to my car, other students were already arriving. I walked around the school and followed the line of traffic. I was happy to see that most of the cars

were older than mine, nothing notable. Back home, I had lived in one of the few working-class neighborhoods that made up the idyll Valley district. It was common to see brand new Toyotas or Hondas in the student parking lot. The prettiest car here was a shiny Jeep, and it caught my eye. Still, I turned off the engine as soon as I got to a place, lest the thunderous volume catches my eye.

I looked at the map in the car and tried to memorize it now; I hope I do not have to walk with him

all day. I stuffed everything into my bag, slung the strap over my shoulder, and took a deep breath. I can do it, I lied to myself weak. No one would bite me. I finally execrated and got out of the car.

I kept my face pulled back in my hood as I walked toward the sidewalk with my kiddish pink backpack, which was crowded with teenagers. My simple black jacket did not attract attention, I realized with relief.

Once around the cafeteria, the building there was easy to spot. A large black '13' has been painted over a white square in the east corner. As I approached the door, my breathing began to hyperventilate. I tried to hold my breath as I followed two unisex raincoats through the door.

The classroom was small. The people in front of me stopped just inside the door to hang their coats on a long row of hooks. I copied them. There were two girls,

one porcelain blond-haired person-haired person, the other also pale, with light brown hair. At least my skin would not come out here.

I brought the note to the professor, a tall, hairless man whose desk bore a name tag finding him as Mr. Stackawitz. He stared at me when he saw my name - not an encouraging response - and of course, I blushed tomato red. While negligibly he sent me to an unobstructed desk in the back without familiarizing me with class.

It was harder for my new classmates to look me in the back, but somehow, they made it. I attended the reading list the teacher had given me. It was quite simple- Brontë, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Faulkner. I had already read everything. It was comforting... and boring. I was wondering if my mother would send me my file of old essays or if she would think it, was fraud. I went through various conversations with her in my head as the teacher continued to talk.

When the bell tolled, a nasal hum, a lanky boy with skin issues and oil-black hair leaned down the aisle to speak to me.

'You are Lill Natalie-Black, aren't you?' He looked like the guy from the overly helpful chess club.

'Lilla,' I corrected. Everyone within three seats turned to me.

'Where's your next lesson?' ' He asked.

I had to check my bag. 'Uh, government, with Jefferson, in the building.'

There was nowhere to look without meeting prying eyes.

'I'm on my way to building four, I could show you the way...' Too helpful. 'I'm J.A,' he added.

I smile shyly. 'Thanks a lot.'

We took our jackets and went out into the rain, which had resumed. I could have sworn there were several people behind us close

enough to hear. I was hoping not to become paranoid.

'So, it's very different from Phoenix, huh?' He asked.

'Absolutely.'

'It doesn't rain much there, does it?'

'Three or four times a year.'

'Wow, how does it have to be? He wondered.

'Sun shining,' I tell him.

'You don't look very tanned.'

'My mother is partially pal.'

He looked at my face with concern and I sighed. It looked like clouds, and a sense of humor did not mix. A few months of this and I forgot how to use sarcasm.

We walked around the cafeteria to the south buildings near the gym. J.A led me straight to the door even though it was marked.

'Well, good luck,' he said when I touched the handle. 'Maybe we have other classes together.' He looked hopeful.

I gave him a vague smile and went inside.

The rest of the morning went the same way. My trigonometry teacher, Mr. DeVolcano , whom I would have hated anyway just for the material he taught, was the only one to make me stand in front of the class and introduce myself. I stuttered,

blushed, and tripped over my boots on my way to my seat.

After two lessons, I started to recognize several faces in each class. There was always someone braver than the rest who would show up and ask me questions about how I loved McAuley. I tried to be a diplomat, but I lied a lot. At least I never used the card.

A girl sat next to me in Trigo and Spanish and took me to the cafeteria for lunch. She was tiny, a few inches shorter than my five-foot-

four, but her very curly black hair made up much of the difference between our heights. I could not remember her name, so I smiled and nodded as she chatted about teachers and classes. I was not trying to follow.

We sat at the end of a full table with some of her friends she introduced me to. I forgot all their names as soon as she said them. They seemed impressed by their courage to speak to me. The English

boy, J.A, waved at me from across the room.

It was there, sitting in the dining room conversing with seven curious strangers, that I first saw them.

They sat in the corner of the cafeteria, as far from my seat in the long room as possible. It was five. They neither spoke nor ate, although each had a tray of untouched food in front of them. Unlike most of the other students, they were not staring at me, so it was safe to watch them

without fear of meeting a pair of overly interested eyes. But it was none of those things that caught and held my attention.

They did not look alike at all. One of the three boys was tall - muscular like a serious weightlifter, with dark, curly hair. Another was a taller, thinner, but still muscular and honey blond-haired person- haired person. The last one was lanky, less bulky, with messy tan hair. He was more childlike than the others, who

looked like they were in college or even teachers rather than students.

The girls were opposed. The tall one was sculptural. She had a gorgeous figure, the kind you saw on the cover of the Sports Illustrates swimsuit issue, the kind that made all the girls around her suffer with their self-esteem just because she was in the same room. Her hair was golden and gently swept down the middle of her back. The little girl was like an elf, extremely thin, with small features. Her hair was jet black,

cropped short, and swept in all directions.

And yet, they were all the same. Each of them was chalk-pale, the palest of all the students living in this sunless city. Paler than me, the albino. They all had very dark eyes, despite the range of hair tones. They also had dark circles under their eyes - purple bruises. As if they were all suffering from a sleepless night or almost recovered from a broken nose. Although their noses, all their

facial features, were straight, perfect, and square.

But none of that is why I could not look away.

I stared at them because their faces, so different, so similar, were all dazzlingly beautiful, inhuman. They were faces you would not expect, except on the airbrushed pages of a fashion magazine. Or painted by an old expert like an angel's face. It was hard to decide who was prettier - the perfect blonde girl or the bronze-haired boy.

They were all looking away - away from each other, away from other students, away from anything as far as I could tell. As I watched, the little girl got up with her tray- unopened lemonade, bitten apple- and walked away with a quick, graceful run worthy of a podium. I watched in amazement at her dancer's nimble step until she put down her tray and slipped out the back door faster than I thought possible. My eyes turned to the

others who were sitting there without changing anything.

'Who are you?' I asked the girl from my Spanish class whose name I had forgotten.

When she looked up to see who I was talking about - although she already knew that from my tone of voice - he suddenly looked at her, the thinnest, the most childish, the youngest. He looked at my neighbor for a split second, then his dark eyes blinked into mine.

Then he quickly looked away, faster than I could, though I at once looked down in embarrassment. In that brief glimpse, her face was completely uninteresting - it was as if she had called out his name, and he had looked up in involuntary response, having already decided not to answer.

My neighbor chuckled in embarrassment and looked at the table like me.

'This is Melvin and Dejen Shezor and Vivian and Jae Mercado.

The one who left was Naddalin Natalie Shezor; they all lived together with Dr. Shezor and his wife.' She said this calmly.

I glimpsed sideways at the handsome boy, who was peeking at his tray now, picking a bagel to compositions with long, pale fingers. His jaws were moving very quickly, his excellent lips barely opening. The other three still glanced away, and yet he was uttering quietly to them.

Strange, unpopular names, I thought. The kinds of names

grandparents had. But that was in vogue here - small town characters? I finally remembered that my neighbor was called Charity-Anna, a perfectly common name. There were two girls named Charity-Anna yet just called Anny in my History class back home.

'They are... very nice-looking.' I struggled with the conspicuous understatement.

'Yes!' Charity-Anna agreed with another chuckle. 'They're all together though - Dejen and Vivian, and Jae and Naddalin Natalie, I

mean. And they live together.' Her voice held all the shock and condemnation of the small town, I thought critically. But, if I were being honest, I had to admit that even in Phoenix, it would cause hearsay.

'Which ones are the Shezor?' I asked. 'They don't look related...'

'Oh, they are not. Dr. Shezor is young, in his twenties or early thirties. They are all adopted. The Mercados are siblings, twins -

the blond-haired person- haired people - and they are foster children.'

'They look a little old for foster children.'

'They are now, Jae and Vivian are both eighteen, but they have been with Mrs. Shezor since they were eight. She is their aunt or something like that.'

'That's really kind of nice - for them to take care of all those kids like that, when they're so young and everything.'

'I guess so,' Charity-Anna admitted reluctantly, and I got the impression that she did not like the doctor and his wife for some reason. With the glances she was throwing at their adopted children, I would presume the reason was jealousy. 'I think that Mrs. Shezor can't have any kids, though,' she added as if that eased their service.

Throughout all this discussion, my eyes flashed repeatedly to the table where the

strange family sat. They continued to look at the walls and not eat.

'Have they always lived in McAuley?' I asked. Certainly, I would have caught them on one of my summers here.

'No,' she said in a voice that implied it should be obvious, even to a new arrival like me. 'They just moved down two years ago from somewhere in Canada.'

'You know.' Now I am starting to get angry. He was too stubborn to dwell on the negative.

He heard the change in my voice. His eyes narrowed. 'I don't think I'm strong enough to stay away from you, so you'll have your way... kill or not,' he added angrily.

'Nice.' But he did not promise it - a fact I have not forgotten. The shock was only slight; I had no strength to control his anger. 'He told me how you quit...now I want to know why,' I said.

'Why?' He repeated earnestly.

'Why did you do it? Why didn't you let the poison spread? Now I would be like you.'

Melvin's eyes seemed to turn a flat black, and I remembered that this was something he never wanted me to know. Naddalin Natalie must have been too concerned with what she had learned about herself...or she was too careful with the ideas around her to fill me in on the mechanics of vampire transformations. He was surprised and angry. His nose flared, and his

mouth looked like it was split from stone.

He would not answer that much was clear.

'I'll be the first to admit that I have no experience with relationships,' I said. 'But it just seems logical... a man and a woman should be equal to some degree... like, one of them cannot always step in and save the other. They must protect each other equally.'

He folded his arms by the side of my bed and rested his chin on

his hands. His expression softened, and his anger is intense. He decided he was not going to be mad at me. I was hoping to get a chance to warn Naddalin Natalie before she found him.

'You saved me,' he said quietly.

'I can't be Joyce Dunn all the time,' I said. 'I want to be Superman too.'

'You don't know what you're asking for.' His voice was soft; He

looked intently at the edge of the pillowcase.

'I do.'

'Lilla, you do not know. It has taken me almost ninety years to think about this, and I am still not sure.'

'Do you wish Melchor hadn't saved you?' 'No, I don't want that.' He paused before continuing. But my life is over. I did not give up anything.'

'You're my life, you're the only one that hurts me to lose.' I was getting better at this. It was easy to admit how much I needed him.

But he was so calm. He decided.

'I cannot, Lilla. You.'

'Why not?' My throat tightened and the words did not come out as I wanted them to. 'Don't tell me it is so hard! I think after today or a few days ago...anyway, it should not be anything after that.'

He stared at me.

'And the pain?' He asked.

I screamed. I could not help it. But I tried to make an expression of how clearly, I remembered the feeling...in the veins',' I said, minutes passed in silence as I struggled to answer his question. I opened my mouth, but no sound came out. I closed it again. He waited, and his expression became triumphant as he knew I had no truthful answer, that does not matter either.' I finally mumbled. My voice was not as

convincing as my swash had been. 'Ren and acute; She always made the choices that worked for her - and she wants me to do the same. And Charlie is patient, he was alone. I cannot take care of them forever. I have my own. life to live.'

'Exactly,' he said. 'And it is not over for you.

' I was there!'

'You'll be fine,' he reminded me.

I took a deep breath to calm myself down, ignoring the pain that awoke. I stared at him, and he stared back. There was no agreement on his face.

'No,' I said slowly. 'I'm not.'

Forehead… 'Of course, you are. You might have a scar or two…'

'You're wrong,' I said. 'I'm going to die.'

'Lilla,' he was worried now be out of here in a few days.

My mind goes back to my thoughts, like dust and spider web connecting my brain.

'When someone wants to kill you, you're brave as a lion - and then when someone mentions dancing...' He shook his head.

I gulped yet again.

'Lilla, I will not let anything hurt you - not even yourself. I will not let go of you once, I promise.'

I thought about that and suddenly felt much better. He could see that in my face.

'There, now,' he said gently, 'it won't be so bad.' He leaned down and wrapped one arm around my waist. I took his other hand and let him lift me from the car.

He kept his arm tightly around me, supporting me as I limped toward the school. In Phoenix, they held proms in hotel ballrooms. This dance was in the gym, of course. It was the only room

in town big enough for a dance. When we got inside, I giggled. There were actual balloon arches and twisted garlands of pastel crepe paper festooning the walls.

'This looks like a horror movie waiting to happen,' I snickered.

'Well,' he muttered as we slowly approached the ticket table - he was carrying most of my weight, but I still had to shuffle and wobble my feet forward - 'there are more than enough vampires present.'

I looked at the dance floor; a wide gap had formed in the center of the floor, where two couples whirled gracefully. The other dancers pressed to the sides of the room to give them space - no one wanted to stand in contrast with such radiance. Dejen and Jae were intimidating and flawless in classic tuxedos. Naddalin Natalie was striking in a black satin dress with geometric cutouts that bared large triangles of her snowy white skin. And Vivian was... well, Vivian. She was unbelievable. Her

vivid scarlet dress was backless, tight to her calves where it flared into a wide ruffled train, with a neckline that plunged to her waist. I pitied every girl in the room, myself included.

'Do you want me to bolt the doors so you can massacre the unsuspecting townsfolk?' I whispered conspiratorially.

'And where do you fit into that scheme?' He glared.

'Oh, I'm with the vampires, of course.'

He smiled reluctantly. 'Anything to get out of dancing.'

'Anything.'

He bought our tickets, then turned me toward the dance floor. I cringed against his arm and dragged my feet.

'I've got all night,' he warned.

Eventually, he towed me out to where his family was twirling elegantly - if in a style unsuitable to

the present time and music. I watched in horror.

'Melvin.' My throat was so dry I could only manage a whisper. 'I honestly can't dance!' I could feel the panic bubbling up inside my chest.

'Don't worry, silly,' he whispered back. 'I can.' He put my arms around his neck and lifted me to slide his feet under mine.

And then we were whirling, too.

'I feel like I'm five years old,' I laughed after a few minutes of effortless waltzing.

'You don't look five,' he murmured, pulling me closer for a second so that my feet were briefly a foot from the ground.

Naddalin Natalie caught my eye on a turn and smiled in encouragement - I smiled back. I was surprised to realize that I was enjoying myself... a little.

'Okay, this isn't half bad,' I admitted.

But Melvin was staring toward the doors, and his face was angry.

'What is it?' I wondered aloud. I followed his gaze, disoriented by the spinning, but finally, I could see what was bothering him. Chiaz Naztherth, not in a tuxedo, but a long- sleeved white shirt and tie, his hair smoothed back into his usual ponytail, was crossing the floor toward us.

After the first shock of recognition, I could not help but feel

bad for Chiaz. He was uncomfortable - excruciatingly so. His face was apologetic as his eyes met mine.

Melvin snarled very quietly.

'Behave!' I hissed.

Melvin's voice was scathing. 'He wants to chat with you.'

Chiaz reached us then, the embarrassment and apology even more clear on his face.

'Hey, Lilla, I was hoping you would be here.' Chiaz sounded like he had been hoping for the exact

opposite. But his smile was just as warm as ever.

'Hi Chiaz.' I smiled back. 'What's up?'

'Can I cut in?' he asked tentatively, glancing at Melvin for the first time. I was shocked to notice that Chiaz did not have to look up. He must have grown half a foot since the first time I had seen him.

Melvin's face was composed of his expression blank. His only answer was to set me carefully on my feet and take a step back.

'Thanks,' Chiaz said amiably.

Melvin just nodded, looking at me intently before he turned to walk away.

Chiaz put his hands on my waist, and I reached up to put my hands on his shoulders.

'Wow, Jake, how tall are you now?'

He was smug. 'Six- one.'

We were not dancing - my leg made that impossible. Instead,

we swayed awkwardly from side to side without moving our feet. It was just as well; the recent growth spurt had left him looking gangly and uncoordinated, he was no better a dancer than I was.

'So, how did you end up here tonight?' I asked without true curiosity. Considering Melvin's reaction, I could guess.

'Can you believe my dad paid me twenty bucks to come to your prom?' he admitted, slightly ashamed.

'Yes, I can,' I muttered. 'Well, I hope you are enjoying yourself, at least. Seen anything you like?' I teased, nodding toward a group of girls lined up against the wall like pastel confections.

'Yeah,' he sighed. 'But she's taken.'

He glanced down to meet my curious gaze for just a second - then we both looked away, embarrassed.

'You look really pretty,' he added shyly.

'Um, thanks. So why did Mr. Black pay you to come here?' I asked quickly, though I knew the answer.

Chiaz did not seem grateful for the subject change; he looked away, uncomfortable again. 'He said it was a 'safe' place to talk to you. I swear the old man is losing his mind.'

I joined in his laughter weakly.

'Anyway, he said that if I told you something, he would get me that master cylinder I need,' he confessed with a sheepish grin.

'Tell me, then. I want you to get your car finished.' I grinned back. At least Chiaz did not believe any of this. It made the situation a bit easier. Against the wall, Melvin was watching my face, his face expressionless. I saw a sophomore in a pink dress eyeing him with timid speculation, but he did not seem to be aware of her.

Chiaz looked away again, ashamed. 'Don't get mad, okay?'

'There's no way I'll be mad at you, Chiaz,' I assured him. 'I will not even be mad at Mr. Black. Just say what you must.'

'Well - this is so stupid, I am sorry, Lilla - he wants you to break up with your boyfriend. He asked me to tell you 'Please.' He shook his head in disgust.

'He's still superstitious, eh?'

'Yes. He was... over the top when you got hurt down in Phoenix. He did not believe...' Chiaz trailed off self- consciously.

My eyes narrowed. 'I fell.'

'I know that Chiaz said quickly.

'He thinks Melvin had something to do with me getting hurt.' It was not a question, and despite my promise, I was angry.

Chiaz would not meet my eyes. We did not even bother to sway

to the music, though his hands were still on my waist, and mine around his neck.

'Look, Chiaz, I know Mr. Black will not believe this, but just so you know - he looked at me now, responding to the new earnestness in my voice - 'Melvin really did save my life. If it were not for Melvin and his father, I would be dead.'

'I know,' he claimed, but he sounded like my sincere words had affected him some. He would be able

to convince Mr. Black of this much, at least.

'Hey, I'm sorry you had to come do this, Chiaz,' I apologized. 'At any rate, you get your parts, right?'

'Yeah,' he muttered. He was still looking awkward... upset.

'There's more?' I asked in disbelief.

'Forget it,' he mumbled, 'I'll get a job and save the money myself.'

I glared at him until he met my gaze. 'Just spit it out, Chiaz.'

'It's so bad.'

'I do not care. Tell me,' I insisted.

'Okay... but, geez, this sounds bad.' He shook his head. 'He said to tell you, no, to warn you, that - and this is his plural, not mine - he lifted one hand from my waist and made little quotations marks in the air - 'We'll be watching.' He watched warily for my reaction.

It sounded like something from a mafia movie. I laughed aloud.

'Sorry you had to do this, Jake,' I snickered.

'I don't mind that much.' He grinned in relief. His eyes were appraising as they raked quickly over my dress. 'So, should I tell him you said to butt the hell out?' he asked hopefully.

'No,' I sighed. 'tell him I said thanks. I know he means well.'

The song ended, and I dropped my arms.

His hands hesitated at my waist, and he glanced at my bum leg. 'Do you want to dance again? Or can I help you get somewhere?'

Melvin answered me. 'That's all right, Chiaz. I will take it from here.'

Chiaz flinched and stared wide-eyed at Melvin, who stood just beside us.

'Hey, I didn't see you there,' he mumbled. 'I'll see you around, Lilla.' He stepped back, waving halfheartedly.

I smiled. 'Yeah, I'll see you later.'

'Sorry,' he said again before he turned for the door.

Melvin's arms wound around me as the next song started. It was a little up-tempo for slow dancing, but that did not seem to concern him. I leaned my head against his chest, content.

'Feeling better?' I teased.

'Not really,' he said tersely.

'Don't be mad at Mr. Black,' I sighed. 'He just worries about me for Charlie's sake. It is nothing personal.'

'I'm not mad at Mr. Black,' he corrected in a clipped voice. 'But his son is irritating me.'

I pulled back to look at him. His face was profoundly serious.

'Why?'

'First of all, he made me break my promise.'

I stared at him in confusion.

He half-smiled. 'I promised I wouldn't let go of you tonight,' he explained.

'Oh. Well, I forgive you.'

'Thanks. But there is something else.' Melvin frowned.

I waited patiently.

'He called you pretty,' he finally continued, his frown deepening. 'That's an insult, the way you look right now. You are much more than beautiful.'

I laughed. 'You might be a little biased.'

'I do not think that is it. Besides, I have excellent eyesight.'

We were twirling again, my feet on his as he held me close.

'So, are you going to explain the reason for all of this?' I wondered.

He looked down at me, confused, and I glared meaningfully at the crepe paper.

He considered for a moment and then changed direction, spinning me through the crowd to the back door of the gym. I caught a glimpse of Charity-Anna and Buddy dancing, staring at me curiously. Charity-Anna waved, and I smiled back quickly. Jeannette was there, too, looking blissfully happy in the arms of little Chiaz Naztherth; she did not look up from his eyes, a head lower than hers. Lee and Rebeca, Emily, glaring toward us, with Joseph Shaw; I could name every face that

spiraled past me. And then we were outdoors, in the cool, dim light of a fading sunset.

As soon as we were alone, he swung me up into his arms and carried me across the dark grounds till he reached the bench beneath the shadow of the madrone trees. He sat there, keeping me cradled against his chest. The moon was already up, visible through the gauzy clouds, and his face glowed pale in the white light. His mouth was hard, his eyes troubled.

'The point?' I prompted softly.

He ignored me, staring up at the moon.

'Moonlight, again,' he murmured. 'Another ending. No matter how perfect the day is, it always must end.'

'Some things don't have to end,' I muttered through my teeth, instantly tense.

He sighed.

'I took you to the prom,' he said slowly, finally answering my question, 'because I do not want you to miss anything. I do not want my presence to take anything away from you if I can help it. I want you to be human. I want your life to continue as it would have if I had died in nineteen- fourteen like I should have.'

I shuddered at his words and then shook my head angrily. 'In what strange parallel dimension would I ever have gone to prom of

my own free will? If you were not a thousand times stronger than me, I would never have let you get away with this.'

He smiled briefly, but it did not touch his eyes. 'It wasn't so bad, you said so yourself.'

'That's because I was with you.'

We were quiet for a minute; he stared at the moon, and I stared at him. I wished there were some way to explain how very uninterested I was in normal human life.

'Will you tell me something?' he asked, glancing down at me with a slight smile.

'Don't I always?'

'Just promise you will tell me, 'He insisted, grinning.

I knew I was going to regret this instantly. 'Fine.'

'You seemed honestly surprised when you figured out that I was taking you here,' he began.

'I was,' I interjected.

'Exactly,' he agreed. 'But you must have had some other theory... I am curious - what did you think I was dressing you up for?'

Yes, instant regret. I pursed my lips, hesitating. 'I don't want to tell you.'

'You promised,' he objected.

'I know.'

'What's the problem?'

I knew he thought it was mere embarrassment holding me

back. 'I think it will make you mad - or sad.'

His brows pulled together over his eyes as he thought that through. 'I still want to know. Please?'

I sighed. He waited.

'Well... I assumed it was some kind of... occasion. But I did not think it would be some trite human thing... prom!' I scoffed.

'Human?' he asked flatly. He had noticed the keyword.

I looked down at my dress, fidgeting with a stray piece of chiffon. He waited in silence.

'Okay,' I confessed in a rush. 'So, I was hoping that you might have changed your mind... that you were going to change me, after all.'

A dozen emotions played across his face. Some I recognized- anger... pain... and then he seemed to collect himself and his expression became amused.

'You thought that would be a black- tie occasion, didn't you?' he teased, touching the lapel of his tuxedo jacket.

I scowled to hide my embarrassment. 'I do not know how these things work. To me, at least, it seems more rational than prom does.' He was still grinning. 'It's not funny,' I said.

'No, you're right, it's not,' he agreed, his smile fading. 'I'd rather treat it like a joke, though, than believe you're serious.'

'But I am serious.'

He sighed deeply. 'I know. And you are really that willing?'

The pain was back in his eyes. I bit my lip and nodded.

'So ready for this to be the end,' he murmured, to himself, 'for this to be the twilight of your life, though your life has barely started. You are ready to give up everything.'

'It's not the end, it's the beginning,' I disagreed under my breath.

'I'm not worth it,' he said sadly.

'Do you remember when you told me that I didn't see myself very clearly?' I asked, raising my eyebrows. 'You obviously have the same blindness.'

'I know what I am.'

I sighed.

But his mercurial mood shifted on me. He pursed his lips, and his eyes were probing. He examined my face for a long moment.

'You're ready now, then?' He asked.

'Um.' I gulped. 'Yes?'

He smiled and inclined his head slowly until his cold lips brushed against the skin just under the corner of my jaw.

'Right now?' he whispered, his breath blowing cool on my neck. I shivered involuntarily.

'Yes,' I whispered, so my voice would not have a chance to break. If he thought I was bluffing,

he was going to be disappointed. I had already made this decision, and- I was sure. It did not matter that my body was rigid as a plank, my hands balled into fists, my breathing erratic...

He chuckled darkly and leaned away. His face did look disappointed.

'You can't really believe that I would give in so easily,' he said with a sour edge to his mocking tone.

'A girl can dream a little, that is what my siter would have said.'

His eyebrows rose. 'Is that what you dream about? Being a monster?'

'Not exactly,' I said, frowning at his word choice. Monster, indeed. 'Mostly I dream about being with you forever.'

His expression changed, softened, and saddened by the subtle ache in my voice.

'Lilla.' His fingers lightly traced the shape of my lips. 'I will stay with you - isn't that enough?'

I smiled under his fingertips. 'Enough for now.'

He frowned at my tenacity. No one was going to surrender tonight. He execrated, and the sound was a growl.

I handled his face. 'Look,' I said. 'I love you more than everything else in the world connected. Isn't that adequate?'

'Affirmative, it is sufficient,' he responded, beaming. 'Adequately for evermore.'

And he tilted down to squeeze his lifeless lips once more to my lips, with the rays of moonlight shining within the windowpanes.

'Do you need any help finding your next class?'

'I am headed to the gym. I think I can find it.'

'That's my next class, too.' He seemed thrilled, though it was not that big of a coincidence in a school this small.

We walked to class together; he was a chatterer - he supplied most of the conversation, which made it easy for me. He had lived in California till he was ten, so he knew how I felt about the sun. It turned out he was in my English class also. He was the nicest person I had met today.

But as we were entering the gym, he asked, 'So, did you stab Melvin Shezor with a pencil or what? I have never seen him act like that.'

I cringed. So, I was not the only one who had noticed. And that was not Melvin Shezor's usual behavior. I decided to play dumb.

'Was that the boy I sat next to in Biology?' I asked artlessly.

'Yes,' he said. 'He looked like he was in pain or something.'

'I don't know,' I responded. 'I never spoke to him.'

'He's a weird guy.' Buddy lingered by me instead of heading to the dressing room. 'If I were lucky enough to sit by you, I would have talked to you.'

I smiled at him before walking through the girls' locker room door. He was friendly and admirable. But it was not enough to ease my irritation.

The Gym teacher, Coach Clapp, found me a uniform but did

not make me dress down for today's class. At home, only two years of RE. were needed. Here, PE was mandatory for all four years. McAuley was my hell on Earth.

I watched four volleyball games running simultaneously. Remembering how many injuries I had sustained - and inflicted - playing volleyball, I felt faintly nauseated.

The final Lily rang at last. I walked slowly to the office to return my paperwork. The rain had drifted away, but the wind was strong and

colder. I wrapped my arms around myself.

When I walked into the warm office, I turned around and walked back out.

Melvin Shezor stood at the desk in front of me. I recognized again that tousled bronze hair. He did not appear to notice the sound of my entrance. I stood pressed against the back wall, waiting for the receptionist to be free.

He was arguing with her in a low, attractive voice. I quickly

picked up the gist of the argument. He was trying to trade from sixth-hour Biology to another time - any other time.

I just could not believe that this was about me. It had to be something else, something that happened before I entered the biology room. The look on his face must have been about another aggravation entirely. It was impossible that this stranger could take such a sudden, intense dislike for me.

The door opened again, and the chilly wind suddenly gusted through the room, rustling the papers on the desk, and swirling my hair around my face. The girl who came in merely stepped to the desk, placed a note in the wire basket, and walked out again. But Melvin Shezor's back stiffened, and he turned slowly to glare at me - his face was absurdly handsome - with piercing, hate-filled eyes. For an instant, I felt a thrill of genuine fear, raising the hair on my arms. The look

only lasted a second, but it chilled me more than the freezing wind. He turned back to the receptionist.

'Never mind, then,' he said hastily in a voice like velvet. 'I can see that it is impossible. Thank you so much for your help.' And he turned on his heel without another look at me and disappeared out the door.

I went meekly to the desk, my face white for once instead of red, and handed her the signed slip.

'How did your first day go, dear?' the receptionist asked maternally.

'Fine,' I lied, my voice weak. She did not look convinced.

When I got to the car, it was the last car in the lot. It seemed like a haven, already the closest thing to home I had in this damp green hole. I sat inside for a while, just staring out the windshield blankly. But soon I was cold enough to need the heater, so I turned the key and the engine roared to life. I

headed back to Charlie's house, fighting tears the whole way there, walking along the tracks after the car broke down.

3 PAGES

BETTER… WORSE. Much better because it has not rained yet, although the clouds are thick and dark. It is easier because I know what to expect in my day. Buddy sat next to me in English and took me to the next class, and the chess club J.A kept watching him. This is annoying. People do not look at me like they did

yesterday. I sat with a large group at lunch, including Buddy, J.A, Charity-Anna, and a few others whose names and faces I now remember. I started to feel like I was treading water, not drowning.

Worse because I was tired. I still cannot sleep, the air echoes in the house. To make matters worse, when I did not raise my hand, Mr. DeVolcano called me with Trig, and I got the wrong answer. It was a pain because I had to play volleyball and once, I missed the ball and hit my

friend in the head with it. To make matters worse, Melvin Shezor did not go to school at all.

I have been dreading lunch all morning for its weird glitter. Part of me wanted to confront him and demand to know what his problem was. As I lay in bed with insomnia, I imagined what I would say. But I know myself so well I have the guts to do it. I made the timid lion look like an exterminator.

But when I walked into the cafe with Charity-Anna - I tried to

keep my eyes from scanning his seat and failed miserably - I saw four of his brothers sitting at the same table and he was not there.

Buddy greeted us and took us to his table. Charity-Anna seemed excited about the attention, and her friends were quick to join us. But when I tried to listen to their whispers, I felt extremely uncomfortable and nervously waited for that moment to come. I hope he ignores me when he comes and proves my suspicions are false.

She did not come, and I got increasingly nervous as time went on.

When lunch was over, and he still was not there, I went into biology with more confidence. Buddy, with golden retriever qualities, walked faithfully by my side in class. I held my breath at the door, but neither was Melvin Shezor. I execrated and went back to my seat. Buddy followed, talking about an upcoming trip to the beach. He stood by my desk until Lily rang. Then she

gave me a wry smile and sat down next to a girl with badly permed bangs. It looks like I must do something for Buddy, it is not easy. In a city where everyone lives above everyone else, diplomacy is essential. I have never been overly cautious. I am not used to dealing with overly friendly people.

I felt relieved in Melvin's absence. I tell myself repeatedly. But I could not shake that lingering suspicion that I was the reason for his absence. It is ridiculous and

selfish to think that I can touch someone so hard. It is out of the question. Yet I cannot help but worry that this is true.

The school days are finally over, the volleyball incident has removed the flush from my cheeks, and I quickly switched back to jeans and a blue sweater. I hurried out of the girls' locker room, delighted to discover that I had temporarily managed to escape my hound friend. I hurried to the parking lot. Now it is crowded with fleeing students. I got

in my car, opened my bag, and made sure I had what I needed.

Last night I found out that Charlie does not cook much except fried eggs and bacon. So, I asked for kitchen details to be assigned during my stay. He was willing to give him the keys to the banquet hall. I also learned that he had no food at home. So, I had my shopping list and money in a jar labeled 'Food, Money' in my cupboard, and I went to Thriftway.

I killed my deafening machine for the rest of my life,

turning my head in disregard, and tumbled cautiously into a spot in a queue of cars waiting to pull out of the parking lot. As I waited, trying to pretend the tinnitus was coming from someone else's car, I saw two twins Shezor and Mercado get into their car. That is the shiny new Volvo. certainly. I had not noticed their clothes before - I was obsessed with their faces. Looking at it now, everyone is well-dressed. Simple, but the clothing subtly hints at the designer's origins. With their striking

looks and the style, they carry, they can put on a rag and take it off. To them, having looks and money seems like too much. But life is like that most of the time. There do not seem to be any admissions bought here.

No, I do not think so. Isolation must be their desire. I cannot imagine any door not opening with this level of beauty.

They looked at my humming car as I passed them, and so did everyone else. When I finally

came out of campus, my eyes remained straight and relieved.

Thriftway is not too far from the school, just a few streets south of the highway. Nice to be inside the supermarket. It feels normal. I was shopping at home and happily fell into familiar task patterns. The store is so big that I cannot hear the rain hitting the roof, reminding me where I am.

When I get home, I unload all the groceries and stuff them wherever I can find an open space. I

hope Charlie does not mind. I wrapped the potatoes in foil, cooked them in the oven, coated the steak with the marinade, and put it on top of a carton of eggs in the fridge.

After that, I went upstairs with my bag. Before starting work, I checked my e- mail for the first time in a dry undershirt, with my damp hair in a ponytail. I got three messages.

'Lilla,' Mother wrote...

texting me as soon as I walked in the door. Let me know how

your flight is. It is raining and I already miss you. I am about to pack my bags for California, but I cannot find my pink top. Do you know where I put it? Deann said hello. Mom...

I sighed and went to the next one. Eight hours after the first send.

'Lilla,' he wrote...

Why haven't you emailed me yet? What are you waiting for? Mom's last one was this morning.

Lill, if I do not hear from you by 6- 06 this afternoon, I will call Charlie.

I checked the clock. I still have an hour to go, but my mom is known for getting ahead.

Mom, calm down. I am writing now. Do not do anything rash. Lilla.

I send it and start over.

Mother, everything is fine. Of course, it rained. I am waiting to write something. The school is not

bad, a bit repetitive. I met some nice people sitting next to me at lunch. Your T- shirt is in the dry cleaner's - you should have picked it up on Friday.

Charlie bought me a car; can you believe it? I like. It is old but strong, and that is fine with me, you know.

I miss him too. I will be writing again soon, but I am not going to check my email every five minutes. Relax and breathe. I love you. Lilla.

I decided to read Wuthering Heights again - the novel we are currently studying in English - for fun, and I did when Charlie came home. I forgot the time and hurried downstairs to get the potatoes out and cook the steak.

'Lilla?' My mom called when she heard my voice on the stairs.

Who else? I wonder.

'Hey Dad, welcome home.'

‘Yet all my life my true dad to me was Nadalin's as it was mine being Titus Black

'Thanks.' As I entered the kitchen, he buckled his gun and stepped out of his boots. He never fired a gun at work. But he was ready. When I came here as a kid, he always took out bullets as soon as he walked in the door. He thinks I am old enough now not to accidentally shoot myself or to shoot on purpose in desperation.

'What's for dinner?' he asked cautiously. My mother was an imaginative cook, and her experiments were not always edible. I was surprised and sad that he seemed to remember so much.

'Steak and chips,' I replied, looking relieved.

He was standing in the kitchen doing nothing, looking uncomfortable. While I was working, he clumsily walked into the living room to watch TV. It made us both more comfortable. I made the salad

while the steak was cooking and set the table.

I called him when dinner was ready, and he sniffed gratefully as he entered the room.

'Smells good, Lily.'

'Thanks.'

We ate in silence for a few minutes. It is pleasant. Neither of our minds was quiet. Somehow, we were destined to live together.

'So, what do you think of school? Have you made friends?' he asked as time passed.

'Well, I was in class with a girl named Charity-Anna. I was having lunch with her friend. And this guy, Buddy, was very friendly. They all seemed fine.' With one notable exception.

'It must be Buddy Newton. Nice guy- good family. His father owns a sporting goods store out of town. He makes a good living off all the travelers who pass by.'

'Do you know the Shezor?' I asked hesitantly...

'Dr. Shezor's family? Of course. Dr. Shezor is a nice guy.'

'These... kids...are a little different. They do not seem to fit in well with school.'

Charlie's angry look surprised me.

'People in this town,' he murmured. 'Dr. Shezor is a fantastic surgeon, he could probably work in any hospital in the world and pay ten

times what he pays here,' he continued, growing louder. 'We're lucky to have him - lucky his wife wants to live in a small town. He is an asset to the community and all these people are kind and gentle. When they first moved in, I was skeptical, all that Adopted teens. I think we might have some issues with them. But they are all mature - I have not had a single issue. For some kinds of people living in this place, that is more than I can say More'

This is the longest speech I have ever heard from Charlie. He must feel strongly about everything people say.

I am back; 'they are fine. I just noticed them holding theirs. They are both attractive,' I added, trying to be more complimenting.

'You should see a doctor,' Charlie said with a smile. 'Thankfully, he is happily married. Many nurses in the hospital find it hard to concentrate working with him.'

After dinner, we fell silent again. He cleared the table when I started to eat my plate. She turned on the TV, and after I washed the dishes with my hands- not the dishwasher- I reluctantly went upstairs to do the math. I can feel a tradition taking shape. That night was finally quiet. I fell asleep quickly, exhausted.

The rest of the week is quiet. I am used to my classroom routines. By Friday, I could recognize every student in the school by name,

if not by name. In the gym, the guys on my team learned not to pass the ball to me, and if the opponent tried to exploit my weakness, they would come up to me quickly. I happily avoided them.

Melvin Shezor did not return to school.

Every day I watch anxiously as the rest of the Karen family enter the cafeteria without him. Then I can relax and join the lunchtime conversation. It revolves around a two-week trip to La Push Marine

Park with Buddy. I was invited and agreed to go, more out of politeness than desire. Beaches should be warm and dry.

By Friday, I could walk into my biology class without worrying about Melvin being there. He has dropped out of school. I try not to think about him, but I cannot help worrying about his continued absence, which seems ridiculous.

My first weekend on Fox was peaceful. Charlie is not used to spending time in the usually empty

house and works most of the weekend. I cleaned the house, started my homework, and wrote my mom the happiest email. I went to the library on Saturday, but I was too weak to get a card. I should make an appointment to go to Olympia or Altoona asap and find a good bookstore. I was casually wondering what kind of gas the car was on... shuddering just thinking about it.

The rain over the weekend was mild and calm, so I slept well.

On Monday morning, people greeted me in the parking lot. I do not know all their names, but I waved and smiled at them. It was cold this morning, but luckily it did not rain. Buddy sat in the usual seat next to me in English. We did a quiz at Wuthering Heights. It is simple, extremely easy.

Overall, so far, I feel much more comfortable than I thought. I feel more comfortable here than I expected.

As we left the classroom, white swirls filled the air. I could hear people shouting at each other excitedly. The wind blows across my cheeks and my nose.

'Wow,' Buddy said. 'It's snowing.'

I looked at the little fluff that formed on the sidewalk, whirling irregularly in front of me.

'Hah.' Snow. This is where my good day goes.

He glanced surprised. 'Don't you like snow?'

'No. That means it is too cold to rain.' Of course. 'Also, I think it should be fragmented - - you know, each one is unique. These look like the end of Q- tips.'

'Have you never seen snow before?' he said in disbelief asked.

'Of course, I have.' I stopped. 'On TV.'

Buddy smiled. Then a big, messy snowball landed on the back

of his head. We all turned around to see where it came from. I was suspicious of J.A, he walked away with his back to us - his next class went the wrong way. Buddy had the same idea. He bent down and started scraping up a white mush.

'I'll see you at lunch, okay?' I said as I continued walking. 'As soon as people start throwing wet things, I'll step in.'

He just shook his head, and his eyes fell on J. A's retreating figure.

All morning everyone was talking excitedly about catching snow. It was the first snow of the new year. I closed my mouth. Of course, it is drier than rain - until it melts into the socks.

After Spanish, I willingly went for coffee with Charity-Anna. Porridge balls fly everywhere. I have a paper clip in hand, ready to use it as a shield if needed. Charity-Anna thought I was joking, but something in my expression stopped her from throwing snowballs at me herself.

Buddy caught up to us as we walked through the gate, laughing as the ice melted the spikes in his hair. He and Charity-Anna happily chatted about snowball fights as we queued for groceries. Out of habit, I glanced at the table in the corner. Then I froze in place. There are five people at the table.

Charity-Anna took my hand.

'Hello? Lilla? What do you want?'

I looked down. My ears are hot. I have no reason to feel self-

conscious, I remind me. I did nothing wrong.

'Where's Lilla?' Buddy asked Charity-Anna.

'Nothing,' I replied. 'I'm only drinking soda today.' I have reached the end.

'Aren't you hungry? Charity-Anna asked.

'Actually, I feel a little sick,' I said, keeping my eyes on the floor.

I waited for them to get the food, then followed them to a table with my eyes on my feet table.

I drank the soda slowly and my stomach was churning. Buddy twice asked me how I was feeling with unnecessary worry.

I waited for them to get their food and then followed them to the table, eyes on their feet.

I slowly sip my soda, my stomach rumbling. Buddy asked twice with unnecessary concern how I was feeling. I told her it was

nothing, but I wondered if I should play it off and run to the nurse's office for the next hour. funny I should not run away. I decided to allow myself a look at the Shezor family table. If he looked at me, I would skip biology like a coward.

I lowered my head and looked under my eyelids. None of them looked that way. I raised my head a little. They laughed. Melvin, Jae, and Dejen all had hair full of melted snow. Naddalin Natalie and Vivian leaned away as Dejen waved

his dripping hair at them. They enjoyed the snowy day like everyone else - they looked more like a scene from a movie than the rest of us.

But there was something else besides laughter and jokes, and I could not pinpoint what that difference was. I studied Melvin most attentively. Her skin was less pale, I decided - flushed from fighting the snow - the circles under her eyes were less noticeable. But there was more. I thought, squinting, trying to distinguish the change.

'Lilla, what are you looking at?' Charity-Anna broke in, her eyes following mine.

At that moment, his eyes locked on mine. I lowered my head, letting my hair fall to hide my face. But I was sure when our eyes met that he did not seem as stern or friendly as the last time I saw him. He again just looked curious, somehow displeased.

'Melvin Shezor is staring at you,' Charity-Anna whispered into my ear.

'He doesn't show anger, does he?' I could not help but ask.

'No,' he said, confused by my question. 'What should he do?'

'I don't think she likes me,' I admitted. I still felt bad. I put my head on my hands.

'The Shezor do not like anyone… well, they do not notice anyone enough to like them. But he still looks at you.'

'Don't look at him,' I whispered.

He smiled but looked away. I raised my head to see if he saw and considered violence if he resisted.

Buddy then interrupted us - he was planning an epic blizzard battle in the parking lot after school and wanted us to join. Charity-Anna enthusiastically agrees. The way he looked at Buddy left no doubt that he was ready for whatever he suggested. I remained silent. I should hide in the gym until the parking lot is clear.

I carefully kept my eyes on my desk for the rest of the lunch hour. I decided to honor the deal I made with myself. Since he did not look angry, I went to biology. My stomach turned a little at the thought of sitting next to him again.

I usually did not want to walk into class with Buddy like I did- he seemed like a popular target for snowball snipers- but when we walked in the door, everyone but me sighed. It rained and washed away all traces of snow from the edge of

the sidewalk to clear, icy strips. I pulled up my hood, secretly happy. I could easily go straight home after the gym.

During the construction of the four buildings, Buddy received several complaints.

Entering the classroom, I was relieved to find my desk still empty. Mr. Trudeau walked around the room and distributed a microscope and a box of slides to each table. Class did not start for a few minutes and the room was

buzzing with conversation. I looked away from the door and looked at the cover of my notebook.

I could very clearly hear the chair next to me move, but my eyes were deeply focused on the pattern I was drawing.

'Hello,' said a soft musical voice.

I looked up, startled to find him talking to me. He sat as far from me as the table would allow, but his chair was angled towards me. Her hair was wet, disheveled - yet she

looked like she had just finished shooting a hair gel ad. Her shiny face was friendly, open, a slight smile on her flawless lips. But his eyes were alert.

'My name is Melvin Shezor,' he continued. 'I did not get a chance to introduce myself last week. You are Lilla Natalie-Black.'

My mind was spinning in confusion. Did I make the whole thing up? He is completely polite now. I had to speak; She waited. But I could not say anything normal.

'How did you know my name?' I stammered.

He smiled a soft, bewitching smile.

'Oh, everyone knows your name. The whole town is waiting for your arrival.'

I frowned. I knew it was something like that.

'No,' I continued nonchalantly. 'I was wondering why you called me Lilla?'

He looked confused. 'Do you like Lill?'

'No, I like Lilla,' I said. 'But I think Charlie - I mean my dad - should call me Lill backwards - that's how everyone here knows me,' I tried to explain, feeling like a total idiot.

'Whoa.' He dropped it. I looked away awkwardly.

Fortunately, Mr. Trudeau started the lesson at that moment. I tried to concentrate as he explained the lab we were doing today. The slides in the box were growing.

Working as lab partners, we had to separate slides of onion root tip cells into their representative stages of mitosis and label them accordingly. We were not allowed to use books. In twenty minutes, he comes to see who is right.

'Begin,' he ordered.

'Ladies first partner?' Melvin asked. I looked up to see him smiling such a cute, crooked smile that I could only stare at him like an idiot.

'Or I can start if you want.' The smile faded; He was wondering if I was mentally capable.

'No,' I said shyly. 'I'm moving on.'

I showed up, just a little. I had already done this lab and knew what I was looking for. It would be easy. I slid the first slide under the microscope and quickly adjusted it to the 40X objective. I took a quick look at the slides.

My assessment was confident. 'Professor.'

'Do you mind if I see?' He asked as I began to remove the slide. He held out his hand to stop me as he asked. His fingers are icy cold, as if he has been holding them in the snow before class. But because of that, I did not move my hand so quickly. When he touched me, it stung my hand as an electric current went through us.

'I'm sorry,' he mumbled, at once removing his hand. Still, he kept reaching for the telescope. I was still staring at him in shock as he

studied the slide for less time than I did.

'Professor,' he agreed, writing it neatly in the first place on our worksheet. He quickly switched off the first slide for the second, then glanced briefly.

'Anaphase,' he muttered, writing it down as he spoke.

I kept my voice indifferent. 'Can I?'

He smiled and held out the microscope to me.

I looked eagerly through the eyepiece but was disappointed. Damn, she was right.

'Slide there?' I extended my hand without looking at him.

He handed it to me; He seemed careful not to touch my skin again.

I took the briefest glimpse I could manage.

'Interim phase.' I gave him the microscope before he could ask for it. He took a quick look and then

wrote it down. I would have written it while he watched, but his clear and elegant script intimidated me. I did not want to ruin the page with my clumsy scribbling.

We finished before anyone else came around. I could see that Buddy and his partner were comparing two slides and another group had the book open under the table.

Which left me with no choice but to try not to look at him…failing. I looked up and he was

looking at me with the same indescribable look of despair in his eyes. Suddenly I detected this subtle difference in her face.

'Did you get the introduction?' I blurted it out without thinking.

He was taken aback by my sudden question. 'No.'

'Oh,' I mumbled. 'I thought you had something else in your eye.'

He shrugged and looked away.

I was sure there was something different. I vividly remembered the flat black color of her eyes the last time she saw me, the color standing out against her pale skin and auburn hair. Today, her eyes were an assorted color- a range ocher, darker than butter polish, but with the same golden hue. I could not see how that could be unless he lied about the acquaintance for some reason. Or the McAuley drove me crazy.

I looked down. His hands clenched into tight fists again.

Mr. Trudeau then came to our table asking why we were not working. He looked over our shoulders at the finished lab, then looked deeper to check the answers.

'So, Melvin, didn't you think Lill should have a chance at the microscope?' asked Mr. Trudeau.

'Lilla,' Melvin corrected automatically. 'In fact, he identified three of the five.'

Mr. Trudeau now looked at me; His expression was suspicious.

'Have you done this lab before?' she asked.

I smiled worriedly. 'Not with onion root.'

'Sig Blastula?'

'Yes.'

Mr. Trudeau shook his head. 'Did you attend the Advanced Placement program in Phoenix?'

'Yes.'

'Well,' he said after a moment, 'it's a good thing you two are lab partners.' He mumbled something else as he left. After he left, I started drawing again in my notebook.

'The snow is so bad, isn't it?' Melvin asked. I felt like he was making small talk with me. Paranoia came over me again. As if he overheard my conversation with Charity-Anna at lunch and was trying to prove me wrong.

'Not really,' I answered honestly, not pretending to be normal like everyone else. I was still trying to fight the nagging feeling of doubt and could not concentrate.

'You don't like the cold.' It was not a question.

'Or wet.'

'McAuley must be a tough place for you to live,' he reasoned.

'You have no idea,' I muttered darkly.

He was impressed by what I said, for some reason, I could not imagine. His look was so confused that I tried not to look more than polite.

'Then why are you here?'

No one asked me - not directly, as he claimed.

'It's complicated.'

'I think I can go on,' he pressed.

I paused for a moment and then made the mistake of meeting his

gaze. His dark golden eyes confused me, and I answered without thinking.

'My mother remarried,' I said.

'It doesn't sound that complicated,' she disagreed, but suddenly felt sympathy. 'When did that happen?'

'Last September.' My voice sounded sad, even for me.

'And you don't like him,' Melvin surmised, his tone still kind.

'No, Phil's fine. Too short, but nice enough.'

'Why didn't you stay with them?'

I do not understand his interest, but he looks at me with piercing eyes, as if my dull life story is somehow important.

'Deann travels a lot. He plays ball for a living.' I half smiled.

'Did I hear him?' He asked with a smile in response.

'Not. He is not playing well. Strictly minor league. Moves a lot.'

'And your mother sent you here so you could travel with her.' Again, he said this as a hypothesis, not a question.

My chin went up a fraction. 'No, he did not send me here. I sent it myself.'

His brows knit together. 'I don't understand,' he admitted, needlessly frustrated by the truth.

I sighed. Why did I explain this to him? He continued to look at me with obvious curiosity.

'She was with me at first but missed him. It made her sad...so I decided it was time to spend some quality time with Charlie.'

My voice was sad after I finished.

'But now you are sad,' he pointed out.

'And?' I challenged.

'It doesn't seem fair.' He shrugged, but his eyes were still intense.

I laughed and laughed. 'Didn't anyone ever tell you? Life is not fair.'

'I've heard that somewhere before,' he agreed dryly.

'So that's it,' I insisted, wondering why he was still looking at me like that.

His gaze wandered appraisingly. 'You made a good

showing,' he said slowly. 'But I bet you've suffered more than you let anyone see.'

I looked at him, resisting the urge to stick my tongue out like a five-year-old, and looked away.

'Am I wrong?'

I tried to ignore him.

'I didn't think so,' she muttered.

'Why do you care?' I asked, annoyed. I averted my eyes and saw the teacher making her rounds.

'That's a very good question,' he murmured so quietly, that I wondered if he was talking to himself. But after a few seconds of silence, I decided that was the only answer I could get.

I sighed, frowning at the board.

'Am I bothering you?' she asked. He sounded amused.

I looked at him without thinking... and told the truth again. 'Not really. I am more annoyed with myself. My face is too easy to read.

Mother always calls me her open book.' I frowned.

'Upon, I find you very hard to read.' Despite everything I said and thought, he meant it.

'Then you must be a good reader,' I replied.

'Usually.' He smiled widely, flashing perfect, ultra-white teeth.

Mr. Trudeau then called the class to order, and I listened with relief. I could not believe I explained my miserable life to this strangely

cute boy who may or may not hate me. He seemed engrossed in our conversation, but now out of the corner of my eye, I saw him leaning away from me again, his hands gripping the edge of the table with vague excitement.

I tried to concentrate as Mr. Trudeau showed with overhead transparency what I saw through the microscope without difficulty. But my thoughts were uncontrollable.

When Lily finally rang, Melvin left the room as quickly and

gracefully as he had last Monday. And just like last Monday, I looked back at her in amazement.

Buddy quickly jumped to my side and grabbed my book for me. I imagine him with a wagging tail.

'It was terrible,' she sighs. 'They all look the same. You are lucky to have Shezor as your partner.'

'I had no problem with that,' I said, surprised at his assumption. I at once regretted it. 'I've done labs before though,' I

added before she could hurt her feelings.

'Shezor seemed friendly enough today,' he commented as we shouldered our raincoats. He was not happy about it.

I tried to sound indifferent. 'I wonder what happened to him last Monday.'

I could not focus on what Buddy was talking about as we walked toward the gym and RE. Did not do much to grab my attention. Buddy was on my team today. He

boldly covered both my position and his, so that my shelling was interrupted only when it was my turn to serve; Whenever I got up my team carefully moved out of the way.

When I got to the parking lot, the rain was just mist, but I was more than happy to be in a dry cabin. I once ignored the mind-numbing roar of the engine and turned on the heater. I took off my jacket, pulled down the hood, and combed my wet hair so the curlers could dry it on the way home.

I looked around to make sure it was clear. Then I noticed a motionless white figure. Melvin Shezor was leaning against the front door of the Cadillac, three cars down from me, staring at me intently. I quickly looked away and threw the car in reverse, almost hitting a rusty Toyota Corolla in my haste. Fortunately for Toyota, I hit the brakes in time. It was the kind of car that would scrap my car. I took a deep breath, still looking at the other side of my car, and cautiously pulled

out again with more success. I looked straight ahead as the Volvo passed, but from the view outside I could have sworn I saw him smiling.

4 Marvel

I open my eyes in the morning, some things are different. This is light; there was still a grey-blue glow in the overcast forest sky, but somehow it was more obvious. I realized that there is no fog covering my window. He jumped up and looked out, then sighed in horror. A thin layer of snow covered the yard

and dust covered the top of my car, turning the road white. But that is not the worst part. All the rain yesterday froze the solids. the needle covering of the trees in gorgeous ornate patterns made the highway icy to death. I find it hard not to fall when the ground is dry. Now it may be safe for me to sleep again. Charlie had gone to work before I got off. In many ways, living with Charlie was more like my own place, and I feel lonelier than alone. I threw a bowl of cereal and some orange juice out of

the carton. I was incredibly happy to go to school, which scared me.

I knew it was not the exciting learning environment I was expecting or seeing my new friends. If I am honest with myself, I know I want to go to school because I am going to meet Melvin Shezor. It is very stupid. After my strange and confusing conversation yesterday, I should have avoided it entirely. I doubt. Why is he lying in his eyes? I was still afraid that I would feel animosity toward him at times, and

my tongue still hung over when I imagined his perfect face. I know full well that my league and my league are balls that do not touch the ball. So, I should not rush to see him today. It took every ounce of concentration I had to make it alive on the icy brick trail. When I finally got into the car, I almost lost my balance, but I managed to grab the rearview mirror and save myself. Today is going to be a nightmare. As I drove to school, I was distracted from the fear of falling and the

unnecessary speculation about Melvin Shezor, thinking about Buddy and J.A, and the stark contrast between the teenage boys here and me. I am sure I look like I did in Phoenix. It is just because the boys back home slowly followed me through all the awkward teenage phases and still think of me that way. Probably because I am new here where repairs are exceedingly rare.

My horrendous clumsiness was seen as mild rather than pathetic, causing me to turn into a

troubled teenage girl. Whatever the reason, Buddy's puppyish behavior and J. A's clear rivalry with him are troubling. I am not sure if I do not like being ignored. My car had no problem with the ice covering the road. I drove slowly, though I did not want to cut a path of destruction down the street, and when I got out of the school car, I realized why I was in so little trouble. Something silver caught my eye and I walked to the back of the car, carefully holding onto its sides for support, to check

my tires. It is surrounded by thin chains that intersect in the shape of a diamond. Charlie woke up early knowing how early it was to put snow chains on my car. Suddenly I felt the tension in my throat. I was not used to being looked after, and Charlie's unspoken fears surprised me. I was standing in the back corner of the car, struggling to react to the sudden sensation that came with the snow chains, when I heard a strange sound. It was a loud cry, and it quickly became painful.

I looked up and was amazed. I saw several things at the same time. In slow motion, nothing moves like in a movie. Instead, the adrenaline rush seemed to make my brain work faster and I was able to clearly understand several things at once. Melvin Shezor stopped four cars away from me and looked at me in horror. His face appeared from the pile of faces, all frozen in the same mask of shock. But more important was the dark blue car skidding, tires locked, screeching on the brakes,

and rolling wildly on the ice in the parking lot. He was about to hit the back corner of my car and I was standing between them. I did not even manage to close my eyes. Just before I heard a crunch around the car bay, something hit me hard, but not in the direction I expected. My head hit the cold black top and I felt something hard and cold hanging me from the ground. I lay down on the sidewalk behind the brown car parked next to me. But I had no chance to notice anything else

because the car was still coming. It was curled up on the end of the car, still twisting and sliding, about to hit me again. A low oath made me realize that someone was with me, and the voice was unrecognizable. Two long white arms roared in front of me, the car came to a screeching halt, and a foot in front of me, a large hand respectfully in the deep recesses in the side of the car's body.

Then his hand moved so fast it was not clear. Suddenly a man grabbed the body of the car, and

something pulled me and swung my legs like knives until they hit the black tires. A metallic whine hit my ears, the car stopped, the window rattled, and it hit the asphalt, just a second before where my feet had been. It was completely silent for a second before the screams started. Suddenly in bed, I heard more than one person calling my name. But clearer than all the screams, I could hear Melvin Shezor's low, angry voice in my ear. Pera? Are you OK? 'I am well. My voice sounded strange. I

tried to sit up and realized that he was holding me by the side of his body, holding him with a barbell.' Be careful, warn me of suffering. 'You hit hard. I began to understand the throbbing pain above my left ear.' 'Oops,' I said in surprise. That is what I thought.

Surprisingly, her voice sounded like a choking laugh. Like... 'I walked!' away, trying to clear my mind and figure out where I am.' How did you get here so fast? 'I stand by your Lilla,' he said, his tone

serious again. I turned and sat up, this time allowing myself to loosen the bonds he had wrapped around my waist, as far away from me as possible in the confined space. with his golden eyes. What do I ask him? Then they found us, and a bunch of people started crying, yelling at each other, and yelling at us. 'Don't move,' said one of them. Taylor got out of the car, the others screamed, and there was a flurry of activity around us. I tried to stand up, but Melvin's cold hand pushed my shoulder down.

Stay where you are now. But it is cold,' I complained. I was surprised when he held his breath. His voice has an edge, you are there,' I suddenly remembered, and his laughter stopped. 'You're next to your car.' His expression changed. very tough. I could hear the hoarse voices of adults arriving on the scene. However, I stand by our arguments. I was right, and he will admit it. Lilla, I am with you, I pushed you. He unleashed the full

force of his devastating eyes on me as if trying to convey something vital.

I threw a bowl of cereal and orange juice out of the box. I was excited to go to school and it scared me. I knew it was not the learning environment or meeting new friends I was hoping for. If I were honest with myself, I knew I wanted to go to school because I would have met Melvin Shezor. And it was very stupid.

After the brainless and embarrassing thing, I said yesterday,

I must avoid him completely. And I suspected him; why should he lie with his eyes? I was still afraid of her hostility at times, and her tongue was still tied every time I imagined her perfect face. I understood my league and he was an impenetrable sphere. So, I do not have to worry about seeing him today. Focused on staying alive on the ice brick road. When I finally got to the car, I nearly lost my balance, but managed to save myself by clinging to the side mirror. Today is going to be a nightmare.

As I walked to school, I distracted myself from my fear of falling and unwanted speculation about Melvin Shezor, Buddy, and J.A, and the obvious contrast in how the teenage boys reacted to me. I was sure I looked the same in Phoenix. That is what the boys at home thought of me as they watched me slowly go through all the awkward stages of adolescence. It is because I was a novelty here, and there were few innovations. My crippling clumsiness was more endearing than

pathetic, making me look like a damsel in distress. Whatever the reason, Buddy's puppy-dog behavior and J. A's clear rivalry with him were disconcerting. I was not sure I would rather be ignored.

Black ice covering the road seems to be no problem for my car. I did not want to make a path of destruction down Main Street, but I went very slowly. When I got out of the car at school, I saw why I had so little trouble. Something silver caught my eye and I walked to the

back of the car to check the tires, cautiously supporting them from the side. Around them were thin diamond-shaped chains. Charlie got up and put snow chains on my car, who knows? My voice suddenly became hoarse. I was not used to being taken care of, and Charlie's unspoken concern surprised me.

I was standing in the back corner of the car trying to fight the sudden wave of emotion from the snow chains when I heard a strange sound. It was a very loud shriek,

quickly becoming painfully loud. I looked up in shock. I saw several things at once. Nothing moved in slow motion like in the movies. Instead, the adrenaline made my brain work faster and I was able to absorb several things in detail at once. Melvin Shezor was standing four cars away from me, staring at me menacingly. Frozen in the same mask of shock, his face stood out from the sea. But more importantly, the dark blue van skidded, wheels locked and brakes screeching wildly

across the ice in the parking lot. I was standing between them as they tried to hit the back corner of my car. I did not even have time to close my eyes.

Just before I heard the cracking sound of the van folding around the bed, something hit me hard, but not in the direction I expected. My head cracked through the ice cap, and I felt something hard and cold push me to the ground. He was lying on the pavement behind the yellow car parked next to him.

But the minibus kept coming, so there was no chance of noticing anything else. It swung around the end of the car, skidding, and was about to crash into me again.

I felt someone with me as I uttered a soft oath, and I could not help but recognize the voice. Two long white arms came down protectively in front of me and the van shuddered to a halt near to my face, their large hands fitting perfectly into the deep recesses on the side of the van's body.

Then his hand moved so fast it blurred. One suddenly gripped the underbody of the van, and something dragged me, twisting my legs like a rag doll and hitting the wheels of the brown car. The screech of metal hurt my ears and the van landed on the asphalt with shattering glass - exactly where my feet had been a second ago.

There was silence for a second before the screaming started. Suddenly I heard more than one person yelling my name as I fell

asleep. But Melvin Shezor's low, frenzied voice rang out louder than all the screams.

'Lilla? Are you okay?'

'I am okay.'

Then my voice sounded strange. I tried to get up and realized that he was holding me by the side of his body with metal bars.

'Be careful,' he warned as I struggled. 'You hit your head pretty hard.'

I experienced a throbbing pain centered above my left ear.

'Oh,' I said, surprised.

I thought so. Surprisingly, her voice sounded like she was stifling a laugh.

'How…' I straightened my head and ran, trying to control myself. 'How did you get here so fast?'

'I was standing right next to you, Lilla,' he said in a serious tone again.

- I sat back down, this time he allowed me to wrap his arms around my waist, releasing his arms and sliding as far from me as he could in the confined space. I lost my way again with the power of his golden eyes when I saw his worried and innocent face. What did I ask him?

Then we found them in tears, yelling at each other and yelling at us.

'Don't move,' someone instructed.

'Get Tyler out of the van!' someone else shouted.

There was a lot of activity around us. I tried to get up, but Melvin's cold hands lowered my shoulders.

'Just stay still for now.'

'But it's cold,' I complained. He laughed under his breath to my surprise. There was a sound edge.

'You were there,' I suddenly remembered, stopping his laughter. 'You were next to your car.'

His face hardened. 'No, I didn't.'

'I saw you.' There was chaos all around us. I could hear the loud voices of adults arriving on the stage. But I persisted in our argument; I was right, he was going to admit it.

'Lilla, I stood with you and pulled you out of the way.' He opened his eyes to me with full, devastating power, as if trying to say something important.

'No.' I set my jaw.

The gold in his eyes flashed. 'Please, Lilla.'

'Why?' I asked.

'Trust me,' he begged, his voice soft and choked.

I could hear the sirens now. 'Promise to explain everything to me later?'

'Okay,' he snapped, suddenly annoyed.

'Fine,' I repeated angrily.

It took six EMTs and two teachers - Mr. DeVolcano and Coach

Clapp - to drop the van far enough away from us to get stretchers in. Melvin forcefully refused his and I tried to do the same, but the traitor told them he would hit my head and I had a concussion. I almost died of humiliation when they put the neck brace on. It seemed like the whole school was there, watching warily as I was loaded into the back of the ambulance. Melvin had to drive in front. He was crazy.

To make matters worse, Chief Black arrived before I could be safely removed.

'Lilla!' He screamed in panic as he recognized me on the stretcher.

'I'm fine, Char- dad,' he sighed. 'There's nothing wrong with me.'

He went to the nearest EMT for a second opinion. I tuned it to contemplate the jumble of inexplicable images chasing my mind. As I was pulled away from the

car, I noticed a deep dent in the bumper of the car - a very distinct dent that matched the contours of Melvin's shoulders... as if he had pushed himself against the car with enough force to break the metal frame. to damage.

- And-

Then there was his family, who watched from a distance, with expressions ranging from disapproval to anger, but without any sign of concern for their brother's safety.

I tried to produce a logical solution that could explain what I had just seen - one that ruled out the assumption that I was crazy.

Naturally, the ambulance received a police escort to the provincial hospital. I felt ridiculous the whole time I was unloaded. To make matters worse, Melvin was walking through the hospital doors on his own. I grit my teeth.

I was taken to the emergency room, a long room with a row of beds separated by pastel-

colored curtains. A nurse put a pressure cuff on my arm and a thermometer under my tongue. Since no one bothered to pull the curtain around to give me some privacy, I decided I was not forced to wear the sturdy neck brace anymore. When the nurse left, I quickly fastened him with Velcro and threw him under the bed.

There was another crowd of hospital staff, another stretcher was taken to the bed next to me. I recognized Tyler Crowley from my

senior class under the bloody bandage wrapped tightly around his head. Tyler looked a hundred times worse than I felt. But he looked at me concerned.

'Lilla, I'm so sorry!'

'You're fine, Tyler - you look awful, are you okay?' As we spoke, the nurses began to loosen his dirty bandage, exposing a series of shallow cuts on his forehead and left cheek.

He ignored me. 'I thought I was going to kill you! I went too fast

and accidentally hit the ice...' He ducked when a nurse started punching him in the face.

'Don't worry, I missed you.'

'How did you get out of the way so quickly? You were there and then you were gone...'

'Um... Melvin pulled me aside.'

He looked confused. 'WHO?'

'Melvin Shezor - he was standing next to me.' I have always

been a terrible liar; I did not sound convincing at all.

'Shezor? I did not see him... wow, it all happened so fast, I guess. Is he okay?'

'I think so. He is here somewhere, but they did not let him be used on a stretcher.'

I knew I was not crazy. What happened? There was no way to explain what I had seen.

Then, I was driven off to have an X-ray of my head. I told them

that there was nothing wrong and that I was right. Not even a shock. I asked if I could leave, but the nurse told me to talk to a doctor first. So, I was stuck in the emergency room, waiting, chased by Tyler's constant apologies and promises to make it right. Every time I tried to convince him I was okay, he kept torturing himself. Finally, I closed my eyes and ignored him. He continued with a remorseful murmur.

'Is she sleeping?' asked a musical voice. My eyes opened.

Melvin stood smiling at the foot of my bed. I stared at him. It was not easy - it would have been more natural to watch.

'Hey, Melvin, I'm so sorry,' Tyler began.

Melvin raised his hand to stop him.

'No blood, no dirt,' he said, blinking his brilliant teeth. He went to the edge of Tyler's bed, opposite me. He smiled again.

'So- o what's the verdict?' he asked me.

'There's nothing wrong with me, but they won't let me go,' he complained. 'How are you not tied to a stretcher like the rest of us?'

'It's about what you know,' he replied. 'But don't worry, I've come to accept you.'

Then a doctor walked around the corner and my jaw dropped. He was young, he was blond... and he was prettier than any movie star I had ever seen. However,

he was pale and tired looking, with circles under his eyes. According to Charlie's description, this must have been Melvin's father.

'So, Miss Natalie-Black,' said Dr. Shezor in an extremely attractive voice, 'how do you feel?'

'I'm fine,' I said, one last time, I hoped.

He went to the window in the wall above my head and turned it on.

'X- rays look good,' he said. 'Does your head hurt? Melvin said you hit him too hard.'

'It's all right,' I repeated with a sigh and quickly walked over to Melvin.

The doctor's cold fingers brushed lightly against my skull. He noticed when I leaned over.

'Tender?' he asked.

'Not really.' I had worse.

I heard a chuckle and looked to the side to see Melvin's protective smile. My eyes narrowed.

'Well, your fathers in the drawing room- you can go home with him now. But come back if you get dizzy or cannot see at all.'

'Can't I go back to school?' I asked, imagining Charlie trying to be considerate.

'Maybe you should take it easy today.'

I looked at Melvin. 'Is he going to school?'

'Someone has to spread the good news that we survived,' Melvin said smugly.

'Indeed,' corrected Dr. Shezor, 'most of the school seems to be in the waiting room.'

'Oh no,' I moaned, covering my face with my hands.

Dr. Shezor raised his eyebrows. 'Do you want to stay?'

'No!' I got up, threw my legs over the edge of the bed, and quickly jumped down. Very quickly - I wobbled and Dr. Shezor caught me. He looked concerned.

'I'm fine,' I assured her again. No need to tell him my balance issues had nothing to do with the headshot.

'Have some Tylenol for the pain,' he suggested, staring at me.

'It doesn't hurt that much,' I insisted.

'Looks like you've been extremely lucky,' said Dr. Shezor, smiling as he drew my map with a wave.

'Lucky Melvin happened to be standing next to me,' I corrected, staring hard at the subject of my statement.

'Oh, well, yes,' agreed Dr. Shezor, suddenly busy with the papers in front of him. Then he looked at Tyler and went to the other bed. My intuition trembled; the doctor was in it.

'I'm afraid you'll have to stay with us a little longer,' he told Tyler and began checking his cuts.

As soon as the doctor turned his back, I went to Melvin.

'Can I have a word with you?' I hissed under his breath. He took a step away from me, jaws clenched.

'Your father is waiting for you,' he said through clenched teeth.

I glanced at Dr. Shezor and Tyler.

'I'd like to talk to you alone if you don't mind,' I insisted.

He looked furious, then turned and stomped across the long room. I almost had to run to keep up. As soon as we turned the corner into a short hallway, he turned and looked at me.

'What do you want?' he asked irritated. His eyes were cold.

His friendship scared me. My words came out less harshly than I intended. 'You owe me an explanation,' I reminded him.

'I saved your life - I don't owe you anything.'

I turned angrily to his voice. 'You promised it.'

'Lilla, you hit your head, I don't know what you're talking about.' His tone was sharp.

My anger flared now, and I looked at him defiantly. 'There's nothing wrong with my head.'

He looked back. 'What do you want from me, Lilla?'

'I want to know the truth,' I said. 'I want to know why I'm lying about you.'

'What do you think happened?' he broke.

He came out hastily.

'All I know is you were not around me - Tyler did not see you either, so do not tell me I hit my head too hard. That van would crush us both - and it did not, and your hands scratched its side - and you left a scratch on the other car, and you were not hurt at all - and the van

should have broken my legs, but you hold you...' I could hear how crazy it sounded and I could not go on. I was so angry I felt the tears coming; I tried to force them back by gritting my teeth.

He looked at me incredulously, but his face was tense, defensive.

'Do you think I stole a van from you?' His tone questioned my sanity but only made me more suspicious. It was like a line

delivered perfectly by an accomplished actor.

I just nodded once; my jaw clenched.

'Nobody's going to believe this, you know.' His voice now had an edge of mockery.

'I won't tell anyone.' I said each word slowly, controlling my anger carefully.

Surprise crossed his face. 'Then why does it matter?'

'It's important to me,' I insisted. 'I don't like to lie - so there better be a good reason why I'm doing it.'

'Can't you just thank me and get over it?'

'Thank you.' I waited, warmed, and waited.

'You're not letting him go, are you?'

'No.'

'In that case ... I hope you enjoy the disappointment.'

We stroked in silence. I was the first to speak, trying to keep myself focused. I threatened to be distracted by his wild and glorious face. It was like trying to see a destroying angel.

'Why did you bother? I asked him frozen.

He paused and for a moment his breathtaking face suddenly became vulnerable.

'I don't know,' he whispered.

And then he turned his back on me and left.

I was so angry that it made me a few took minutes to move. When I could walk, I slowly made my way to the exit at the end of the hall

The lounge was more uncomfortable than I had feared. It felt like every face I knew in McAuley was there staring at me. Charlie ran to me; I raised my hands.

'There's nothing wrong with me,' I assured her sullenly. I was still

heavy, not in the mood for conversation.

'What did the doctor say?'

'Dr. Shezor saw me and said I was fine and could go home.' he sighed. Buddy, Charity-Anna, and J.A were all there and started to join us. 'Let's go,' I asked.

Charlie put an arm behind my back, without even touching me, and led me to the glass doors of the exit I waved angrily to my friends, hoping to show them they need not worry anymore It was a great relief -

the first time I felt this way - to get on the cruiser drove in silence I was so absorbed in my thoughts I hardly knew Charlie was there I was sure Melvin's protective behavior in the hall was confirmation of the strange things I still did not could not believe I had seen them.

When we got home, Charlie finally spoke.

'Uh... you have to call Renée.' He hung his head, guilty.

I was terrified. 'You told mama!'

'Take me excuse me.'

I slammed the cruiser door a little harder than I should have on my way out outwards.

My mother was, of course, hysterical. I had to tell her I was fine at least thirty times before she calmed down. She begged me to come home - oblivious to the fact that the house was empty at the time - but her pleas were easier to resist than I had imagined. I was consumed by the mystery of Melvin. And more than a little obsessed with Melvin

himself. Stupid, stupid, stupid. I did not want to escape McAuley as much as a normal, normal human would.

I decided I might as well go to bed early that night. Charlie kept looking at me in fear and it got on my nerves. I stopped on the way to get three Tylenol from the bathroom. They helped me and when the pain subsided, I fell asleep.

That was the first night I wanted Melvin Shezor.

5 Encouragement

In my dream it was very dark, and a dim light was coming from Melvin's skin. I could not see his face, only his back as he turned away from me and I was left black. No matter how fast I ran, I could not catch up; No matter how many times I called him, he never turned away. I struggled, waking up in the middle of the night and unable to get back to sleep for what seemed like an exceptionally long time. After that he was in my dreams every night, but

always on the edge, never out of reach.

A month after the accident, he was uncomfortable, tense, and initially awkward.

To my dismay, I found myself the center of attention for the rest of the week. Tyler Crowley was impossible, watching me and trying to fix me somehow. I tried to convince him to forget about everything I wanted more than anything else - especially since nothing had happened to me - but he

was adamant. He followed me between classes and sat down at our now crowded lunch table. Buddy and J.A were less than friendly with him, which made me worry that I might gain another unwanted fan.

No one seemed to care about Melvin, even though I repeatedly claimed he was a hero - that he got out of my way and almost got crushed. I tried to convince him. Charity-Anna, Buddy, J.A, and others always commented that they did not see the van there until it was taken.

I wondered to myself why no one stood far away and saw him before he suddenly saved my life. Frustrated, I realized why - no one always knew about Melvin as I did. No one else sees it the way I do. How sad.

Never had Melvin been surrounded by so many onlookers wanting to discover his story. People avoided him as usual. As always, the Shezor and Mercados were sitting at the same table, not eating, just

talking. None of them, especially Melvin, looked at me.

Sitting next to me in the room, as far away from me as the table would allow, he seemed completely unaware of my presence. Now and then, when his fist rose suddenly- skin stretched white over bone- I thought he was not as uncaring as he looked.

I wish he had not taken me out of the way of Tyler's van - I could not come to any other conclusion.

I really wanted to talk to him and tried the day after the accident. The last time I saw him outside of the ER, we were both upset. I am still angry that they do not trust me much, even though I hold up my end of the bargain flawlessly. But no matter how much he did, he saved my life. And overnight, the heat of my anger melted into overwhelming gratitude.

When I got to biology, he sat and stared straight ahead. I sat down and waited for her to turn to

me. He gave no sign that he knew I was there.

'Hi, Melvin,' I said happily, showing him, I was about to make myself.

Without meeting my eyes, he turned his head a fraction towards me, nodded once, and then looked away.

And that was the last contact I had with him, even though he was there, a foot away from me, every day. Sometimes I cannot stop myself - I look at him from afar, but

in a cafe or a parking lot. I watched his golden eyes darken day by day. But I did not let him know it existed, any more than he showed me in class. I was there and the nightmares continued.

Despite my outright lies, my emails alerted the tenant to Ren and my anxiety, and she called several times in concern. I tried to convince myself that I was only sorry for the weather.

Buddy was at least amused by the seeming coolness between me

and my lab partner. I could see he was worried that Melvin's brave rescue might surprise me, and he was relieved that it had the opposite effect. He became more confident when he sat on the edge of my desk to talk before biology class and completely ignored Melvin when he ignored us.

The snow has washed away after a dangerously snowy day. Buddy is upset that he never got to attend the snowball but is excited that a trip to the beach will soon be

possible. The rain continued heavily, and the weeks went by.

Charity-Anna alerted me to another event looming on the horizon - she would call Buddy in two weeks to ask his permission to invite him to the girls' spring prom on the first Tuesday in March.

'You sure it's okay… you didn't want to ask him?' She continued when I told her that at least she would not compromise.

'No, Anny, I'm not going,' I told her. Dancing was beautiful beyond my range of abilities.

'It's going to be a lot of fun.' Her attempts to convince me were half-hearted. I suspected Charity-Anna liked my popularity more than my company.

'You're going to have fun with Buddy,' I encouraged.

I was surprised the other day that Charity-Anna was not her usual expressive self in trig and Spanish. She was silent when she

walked past me in the middle of class, and I was afraid to ask her why. If Buddy rejected her, I was the last person she wanted to tell.

My fears deepened as Charity-Anna talked to J.A as far away from Buddy as possible. Buddy was unusually quiet.

Buddy was still silent as he led me into the room, the discomfort on his face a bad sign. But I do not talk about it until I am in my place, and it is on my desk. As always, I was electrically aware that Melvin was

sitting just a touch away, as if he were just a figment of my imagination.

'So,' Buddy said, looking at the floor, 'Charity-Anna asked me to the spring dance.'

'So nice.' I made my voice clear and excited. 'You're going to have a lot of fun with Charity-Anna.

'Well…' He was not happy with my reaction as he studied my smile. 'I told her I had to think about it.

'Why are you doing this?' Although I was relieved, I never gave it to her.

His face was bright red as he looked down again. My resolve was shaken by regret.

'Well… I was just wondering if you would consider asking me out.

I paused, hating the wave of guilt that washed over me. But out of the corner of my eye, I saw Melvin's head tilt reflexively in my direction.

'Buddy, I think you should say yes,' I said.

'Have you invited anyone yet?' Did Melvin notice Buddy's eyes flicker in his direction?

'No,' I said. 'I never go to the dance.'

'Why not?' Buddy asked.

I did not want to run into the safety risks that come with dancing, so I quickly produced a new plan.

'I'm going to Altoona that Saturday,' I explained. I had to get out of town anyway - suddenly it was the right time to go.

'Can't you go next weekend?'

'No, sorry,' I said. 'So, you do not have to keep Jace waiting anymore - it is rude.

'Yeah, you're right,' he muttered, turning to return to his seat, frustrated. I closed my eyes and pressed my fingers to my temples trying to get the guilt and sadness

out of my head. Mr. Trudeau began to speak. I sighed and opened my eyes.

- And-

Then Melvin looked at me curiously, the same, familiar edge of frustration now clearer in his black eyes.

I looked back in surprise, expecting him to quickly look away. But instead, he continued to stare into my eyes with intense intensity. When I looked away, there was no doubt. My hands started shaking.

'Mr. Shezor?' The teacher was calling, looking for an answer to a question I did not hear.

'Murphy's Law Cycle,' Melvin replied as he turned to Mr. Trudeau.

I looked down at my book as soon as his eyes left me and tried to find my place. As cowardly as before, I changed my hair over my right shoulder to hide my face. I could not believe the rush of emotion that went through me - because it was the first time, he had seen me in

half a dozen weeks. I could not let this phase affect me. It was sad. More than sad, it was unhealthy.

For the rest of the hour, I tried extremely hard not to recognize him, and since that was impossible, at least not to let him know that I knew him. When Lily finally rang, I turned my back to him to collect my things, expecting him to leave at once as usual.

'Lilla?' His voice should not have been so familiar to me, because

I had known his voice not just for a few weeks, but for my whole life.

He frowned at his perfect face. His eyes were light again today, a deep golden-hazel color. Then I had to look down, regrouping my now tangled thoughts.

'Why was the traffic jam last night?' I asked, and I am still looking away. 'I thought you were supposed to pretend I didn't exist, and not bother me to death.'

'It was for Tyler, not me. I had to give him his chance.'

Laughter.

'You…' she gasped. I could not think of a bad enough word. I felt like the heat of my anger should burn him physically, but he seemed more amused.

- And-

I am not pretending you do not exist,' he continued.

'So, you are trying to annoy me to death? Since Tyler's car did not do the job?'

Anger flashed in his brown eyes. His lips pressed into a hard line, and all signs of humor disappeared.

'Lilla, you are absolutely ridiculous,' he said in a cold deep voice.

My palms were numb - I desperately wanted to hit something. I was surprised. I was usually a non-

violent person. I turned my back and started walking away.

He said, 'Wait.' I kept walking, angrily walking in the rain. But he was by my side, getting along easily.

'I'm sorry, that was rude,' he said as we walked. I ignored him. He continued, 'I'm not saying it's not true, but it was rude to say it, anyway.'

'Why don't you leave me alone?' grumbled.

'I wanted to ask you something,' he said with a laugh, 'but you drove me away.' He seems to have regained his sense of humor.

'Do you have multiple personality disorder?' I asked hard.

'You do it again.'

I sighed. 'Okay then. What do you want to ask?'

'I was wondering if, a week after Saturday- - you know, Spring Dance Day- '

Are you trying to be funny? I interrupted him as I turned toward him. My face flushed as I looked at his expression.

His eyes were wickedly amused. 'Please let me finish?' I bit my lip and clasped my hands together, interlaced my fingers, so I could not make out any rashes.' I heard you say you are going to Altoona that day, and I was wondering if you wanted a ride.'

That was unexpected.

'What or what?' I was not sure what he meant.

'Would you like a ride to Altoona?'

'Who with?' I asked confused.' 'I’m obvious.' He uttered every syllable as if he were talking to a mentally disabled person.

I am still dumbfounded.

'Why?'

'Well, I was planning to go to Altoona in the next few weeks, and to be honest, I'm not sure what If

your car can do that.' 'My car is running fine, thanks so much for your concern.' I started walking again but was incredibly surprised to keep the same level of anger.' 'But can your car get there with one gas tank?' Match my pace again.' 'I don’t see how this is any of your business.' Stupid, brilliant Volvo owner.

'Wasting limited resources is everyone’s business.' 'Honestly, Melvin.' I was thrilled when I said his name, and I hated him. 'No. I can

keep up with you. I thought you did not want to be my friend.'

'I said it would be better if we weren't friends, not because I don't want to be.'

'Oh, thanks, that's all cleared up now.' Very ironic. I realized I stopped walking once 'Other. We were now under the canopy of the cafeteria roof, so I could look him in the face more easily. Which certainly did not help my clarity of thought. It would be more... it would be wiser not to be

my friend.' 'But I'm tired of trying to get away from you, Lilla,' his eyes were wonderfully thick when he said that last sentence, his voice rising. I do not remember how to breathe.

'Are you going to go with me to Altoona?' he then asked, still intense.

I could not speak at all, so I just nodded.

He smiled briefly, then His face turned serious.

'You really have to get away from me,' he warned. 'I'll see you in class.'

He turned suddenly and walked back to the way we came.

6 Bloodshed

I made my way to English in a daze. I did not even realize when I had already entered this class.

'Thank you for joining us, Miss Natalie-Black,' Mr. Stackawitz said insultingly.

I blushed and rushed to my seat.

It was not until the end of class that I realized that Buddy was not sitting in his usual place next to me. I felt a pang of guilt. But he met me and J.A at the door as usual, so I figured I was not completely unforgivable. Buddy seemed to enjoy himself as we walked, and he got excited when he mentioned this weekend's weather report. The rain was supposed to take a slight break, so maybe its trip to the shore is

possible. I tried to look excited to make up for his disappointment yesterday. It was hard; Rain or no rain, we would still be in our forties, if we were lucky.

The rest of the morning passed in a blur. It was hard to believe that I could not just imagine what Melvin had said, and the way his eyes looked. It was just a very convincing dream that I was confusing with reality. It seemed more likely than what I was appealing to on any level.

So- o, I grew impatient and scared when Charity-Anna and I walked into the cafeteria. I wanted to see his face, to see if he was back to the cold, indifferent person I had known for several weeks. Or if, by some miracle, you heard what I thought I heard this morning. Charity-Anna repeatedly teased her dance plans - Emily and Jeannette asked the other boys and they all went together - completely oblivious to my inattention.

I was overcome with disappointment as my eyes fixed incorrectly on his table. The other four were there, but he was absent. Has he returned home? Charity-Anna, still babbling, followed the line, shattering. I lost my appetite - only bought a bottle of lemonade. I just wanted to go sit and sulk.

'Melvin Shezor is watching you again,' Charity-Anna said, finally penetrating my resume with her name. 'I wonder why he's sitting alone today.'

My head exploded. I continued her gaze to see Melvin, smirking, staring at me from an empty table on the other side of the cafeteria where he usually sat. As soon as he caught my eye, he raised his hand and pointed his index finger at me to join him. When I looked at him in disbelief, he winked.

'Is he talking about you?' Charity-Anna asked, with humiliating astonishment in her voice.

'Maybe he needs help with his biology homework,' she muttered

to him. 'Mn, I better go see what he wants.'

I felt like she was staring at me as I walked away.

When I got to his table, I stood behind the chair across from him, undecided.

'Why- don't you sit with me today?' he asked with a smile.

I sat down mechanically, watching him cautiously. He was still smiling. It was hard to believe that someone so beautiful could be real. I

was afraid he would disappear in a sudden puff of smoke and wake up.

He was waiting for me to say something.

'It's different,' she finally succeeded.

'Okay...' He paused, then the rest of the words followed hastily. 'I decided that as long as I was going to hell, I might as well do it too.'

I waited for him to say something logical. The seconds passed.

'You know I have no idea what you mean,' I pointed out at the end.

'I say.' He smiled again, then changed the subject. 'Your friends are mad at me for robbing you.'

'They will survive.' I could feel their dull stares behind my back.

'I may not bring you back,' he said, with an evil look in his eyes.

Then I like- swallowed.

He is laughing. 'You look worried.'

'No,' I said, but my voice cracked stupidly. 'Surprised, actually…what's the point of all this?'

'I told you; I am sick of trying to get away from you. So, I gave up. He was still smiling, but his seductive eyes were serious.

'To sell...? I was repeatedly confused.

'Yes - give up trying to be good. I will do what I want now and drop the chips where I can.' His smile faded as he explained, and a harsh edge crept into his voice.

'You lost me again.'

The twisted, jaw-dropping smile reappeared.

'I always say a lot of things when I talk to you - that's one of the problems.'

'Don't worry - I don't get it,' I said sarcastically.

'I count on it.'

'So, in plain English, are we friends now?'

'Friends...' he mused doubtfully.

'Or not,' she muttered.

He smiles. 'Well, we can try, I guess. But I am warning you now that I am not a good friend of yours.' Behind his smile, the warning was real.

'You say that often,' I pointed at him, trying to ignore the sudden tremor in my stomach and keep my voice steady.

'Yes, because you do not listen to me. I am still waiting for you to believe. If you are smart, you will avoid me.'

'I think you have also clearly expressed your opinion on a mental subject.' My eyes narrowed.

He smiled apologetically.

'So, as long as I…am not smart, we'll try to be friends?' I struggled to sum up the confusing exchange.

'It's the sound of truth.'

I looked at my hand wrapped around a bottle of lemonade, not knowing what to do now.

'What are you thinking about?' asked curiously.

Looking into his deep golden eyes, she was confused and, as usual, told the truth.

'I'm trying to understand what you're doing.'

He clenched his jaw but kept his smile in place with some effort.

'Are you lucky with that?' He asked offhand.

'Not much,' she admitted.

I laughed it off. 'What are your theories?

I was ashamed. I have been hesitating for a month between Bruce Wayne and Peter Parker. It was out of the question for me to admit it.

'Won't you tell me?' he asked, tilting his head to the side with a surprisingly seductive smile.

I shook my head. 'Very embarrassing'.

'It's really frustrating, you know,' he complained.

'No,' I quickly refused, eyes narrowed, 'I cannot imagine why it would be so frustrating, just because someone refuses to tell you what they are thinking, even if they are putting on makeup all the time. a little. ambiguity, the notes are specifically designed to keep you awake wondering what they might mean... Now, why is that so frustrating?

He grimaced...

'Or better,' she continued, 'that pent- up annoyance is now

flowing freely,' I would say that person has also done a wide range of weird things - from saving your life in impossible circumstances one day to treating you like an outcast the next day, and he never explained anything, even after promising. It would also be incredibly quiet.

'You're in a bit of a mood, aren't you?'

'I don't like double standards.'

We stared at each other, not smiling.

He looked over my shoulder, then laughed unexpectedly.

'What or what?'

'I'm rude to you - he wonders whether or not he should interrupt our argument.'

'I am not wrong. I told you; most people are easy to read.'

'Except me, of course.'

'Yes, except you.' His mood suddenly changed. His eyes turned to sadness. 'I wonder why.

'To pull away from the sternness in his gaze. I concentrated on unscrewing my lemonade cap. She took a big sip, staring at the table without seeing her.

You are not hungry? Asked Distracted.

'Wanted to point out that my stomach was already full of butterflies.' ' You, are they? I looked at the empty table in front of him.

'No, I am not hungry. I did not understand his expression - he sounded

'Can you do me a favor?' I asked after a second of hesitation.

He suddenly became suspicious. 'It depends on what you want.'

'Not much.'

Wait, careful but curious.

'I was just wondering...if you could let me know in advance the next time you decide to ignore me for my own good. Just so I am ready.' I looked at the lemonade bottle as I

spoke, tracing the circle of the hole with my little finger.

'That seems fair.' He pursed his lips to keep from laughing when I looked up.

'Thanks.'

'So can I get an answer back?' Student.

'One...'

Tell me a theory.

Excuse me. 'Not this one.'

'You weren't eligible, I just promised an answer,' he told me.

I reminded him again, 'You broke your promises. Just a theory - I will not laugh.'

'Yes, you will.' I was sure.

He looked down, then looked at me through his long dark lashes, his arrogant eyes burning.

'Excuse me?' Breathe, lean on me.

I blinked; my mind went blank. Holy crow, how did he do that?

'What?' I asked in a daze.

'If he please just tells me a little theory.' His eyes still burn on my face.

'Well, was she bitten by a radioactive spider?' Was he also hypnotized? Or was I just a job hopelessly easy?'

'That's not very creative,' he sneered.

'I'm sorry, that's all I have,' I said, annoyed.

'You're not even close.' he joked.

'No spiders?'

'No.'

'And there's no radioactivity?'

'She sighed, 'Shit.'

'I don't mind kryptonite either.', he said laughing. You are not supposed to laugh, remember?'

I struggle to put on makeup.

I warned him, 'I'll find out eventually.'

'I hope you don't try.' He was serious again.

' Because...?'

'What if I am not a superhero? What if I am the bad guy?' He smiled impishly, but his eyes were impervious too.

'His face suddenly stiffened, as if he had been afraid that he had said so many things by chance.

'Are you dangerous?' to tell me that all the time.

He just stared at me; his eyes filled with an emotion I could not understand.

'But not bad,' I whisper, shaking my head. 'No, I don't think you'

You are wrong.' His voice was almost inaudible. He looked

down, stole the cork from my bottle, then turned it on its side between his fingers. I looked at him wondering why I was not scared. he said - it was obvious. But I was anxious, nervous... and more than anything else, I was intrigued. The same thing I always felt when I was near him.

The silence continued until I noticed that the cafeteria was empty.

I jumped to my feet. 'We will be late.'

'Ongoing to class today,' he said, spinning the hood so fast it was a blur.

'Why not?'

'It's healthy to skip class once in a while.' He smiled at me, but his eyes were still cloudy.

I said to him- 'Okay, I'm going'. I was too big a coward to risk getting caught.

He turned his attention back to his temporary climax. 'I'll see you later, then.'

I hesitated, torn, but the first ring sent me rushing for the door - with one last look confirming that he had not moved an inch.

When I was running in class, my head was spinning faster than the bottle cap. So, few questions were answered compared to the number of news asked. At least the rain has stopped.

I was lucky; Mr. Trudeau was not in the room yet when I arrived. I quickly settled into my seat, realizing Buddy and Jeannette

were both looking at me. Buddy looked upset. Jeannette looked a little startled and amazed.

Mr. Trudeau then entered the room, calling the class to ask. He fiddled with some small boxes in his arms. He put them on Buddy's table and asked him to start passing them around the class.

'Okay, guys, I want you all to take a piece of each box,' he said, pulling out a pair of rubber gloves from a lab coat pocket and pulling it out. The high-pitched sound of gloves

snapping into place on her wrists sounded disturbing to me. 'The first should be a card,' he continued, holding up a white card with four distinct squares on it and showing it. The second is a four-pointed rod - 'grab something that looks like an almost toothless hair' - and the third is a sterile micro scalpel. He lifted a small piece of blue plastic and opened it. The spike was not visible from this distance, but my stomach turned.

'I'll bring a dropper to prepare your cards, so please don't start until I join you.' He started again at Buddy's table, placing a drop of water in each of the four squares. 'So, I want you to poke your finger with the clip…' He grabbed Buddy's hand and stabbed the tip at the end of Buddy's middle finger. Oh no. Dewy wetness burst on my forehead.

'Put a small drop of blood on each of the teeth. Squeeze Buddy's finger until the blood comes

out. I swallowed jerkily, my stomach groaning.

'So, apply it to the card,' he said. He finished, holding the filed red card so we could see it. I closed my eyes, trying to hear through my ringing ears...

'The Red Cross is going to hold a blood drive in Big Sur next weekend, so I thought you all should know your blood type. 'He seemed immensely proud of himself. 'Those of you who haven't turned eighteen

will need your parents' permission - I have some slips on my desk.'

He continued in the room with water drops. I placed my cheek on the soft black table and consciously tried to hold on. I could hear screams, complaints, and laughter all around me as my classmates wiggled their fingers. I interceded and execrated slowly through my mouth.

'Lilla, are you okay? Mr. Trudeau asked. His voice was close to my head and sounded alarmed.

'I know my blood type, Mr. Trudeau,' I said weakly. I was afraid to lift my head.

'Are you feeling weak?'

'Yes, sir,' I muttered, kicking myself inwardly for not giving up when I had the chance.

'Can someone take Lilla to the nurse, please? He called.

I did not have to look up to know it was Buddy who had volunteered.

'Can you walk?' asked Mr. Trudeau.

'Yes,' she whispered. Let me out of here, I guess. I will crawl.

Buddy looked excited as he wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled my arm over his shoulder. I leaned on him firmly as I walked out of the classroom.

Buddy gently pulled me across campus. As we stood at the edge of the cafeteria, out of sight of the Fourth Building in case Mr. Trudeau was watching, I stopped.

'Just let me sit down for a minute, please?' I begged.

Help me to sit on the edge of the aisle.

'And whatever you do, put your hand in your pocket,' she warned. I was still dazed. I leaned back to the side, rested my cheek against the wet, icy cement of the sidewalk, and closed my eyes. It helps a bit.

'Wow, you're green, Lilla,' Buddy said nervously.

'Beautiful'? A different voice was calling from afar.

Number! And let me imagine that awful familiar voice.

'What's wrong - did she hurt herself?' His voice was closer now, and he sounded annoyed. I did not imagine it. I closed my eyes hoping to die. Or at least no vomiting.

Buddy looked nervous. 'She passed out. I do not know what happened, she did not even stick her finger out.'

'Beautiful'. Melvin's voice next to me was relaxed now. 'Can you hear me?'

She sighed, 'No.' 'adrift.'

I laughed it off.

'I'd take her to the nurse, but she wouldn't go any further,' Buddy explained defensively.

'I'll take it,' Melvin said. I could still hear the smile in his voice. 'You can go back to class.'

Buddy protested, 'No.' 'I'm supposed to do this.'

Suddenly, the pavement disappeared under me. My eyes widened in shock. Melvin carried me in his arms so easily as if I weighed ten pounds instead of a hundred and ten.

'Put me down!' Please let me not vomit it. He was walking before I finished.

'Hey!' Buddy called, already ten paces behind us.

Melvin ignored her. 'You look terrible,' he told me, smiling.

'Take me back to the pier,' he moaned. The swinging motion of his career has not been helpful. He pulled me away from his body, very carefully, supporting all my weight with his arms only - he did not seem to mind.

'So, you fainted at the sight of blood?' Asked. This amused him.

I did not answer. I closed my eyes again and fought nausea with all my might, my lips tight.

'Not even your blood,' he said amused.

I do not know how he opened the door while carrying me, but it was suddenly warm, so I knew we were inside.

'Oh my god,' I heard a panting female voice.

'She passed out in biology,' Melvin explained.

I opened my eyes. I was in the office and Melvin was jumping from the reception to the nurse's door. Mrs. Stackawitz, the red-haired receptionist, ran ahead of him to keep it open. The nursing

grandmother looked up from the novel in amazement as Melvin ushered me into the bedroom and gently laid me down on the cracked sheet that covered the brown vinyl mattress of one of the beds. Then, move to stand facing the wall as far into the narrow room as possible. His eyes were bright and excited.

'She just fainted a little,' he reassured the stunned nurse. 'They are the blood type in biology.'

The nurse nodded sagely. 'There is always one.'

I stifled a laugh.

'Just lay down for a minute, baby, it'll pass.'

'I know,' she sighed. The nausea was already fading.

'Does this happen often?' She asked.

'Sometimes,' she admitted. Melvin coughed to hide another laugh.

'You can go back to class now,' she told him.

'I'm supposed to stay with her.' He said this with such emphatic authority - although she pursed her lips - that the nurse did not discuss the matter further.

'I'll get you some ice cream for your forehead, honey,' she told me, then walked out of the room.

'I was right,' I complained and closed my eyes.

'Usually - but about what exactly this time?'

Giving up something healthy. I practiced breathing regularly.

'You scared me for a minute there,' he confessed after a pause. His tone sounded like he was admitting humiliating weakness. 'I thought Newton was dragging your body to bury it in the woods.'

'Ha.' I still closed my eyes but felt more natural every minute.

'Honestly, I have seen better-colored corpses. I was afraid that I had to avenge your murder.

'Poor Buddy. I bet he is crazy.'

'He absolutely hates me,' Melvin said happily.

'You can't tell,' I said, but suddenly wondered if he could.

'I saw his face - I can tell.'

'How did you see me? I thought you were giving up. I am fine now, although nausea would pass faster if I had something for breakfast. On the other hand, I may

have been lucky enough to have an empty stomach.

'I was in my car, listening to a CD.' Such a natural response - it surprised me.

I heard the door and opened my eyes to see the nurse putting a cold compress in her hand.

'Here, my darling.' I put it on my forehead. 'You look better,' she added.

'I think it's okay,' I said as I sat down. Just a little ringing in my

ears, no spinning. The mint green walls stayed where they should be.

I could see that she was about to let me down, but then the door opened, and Mrs. Stackawitz poked her head inside...

'We have another one,' she warned.

I jumped up to free the crib for the next patient.

Prepare the compress for the nurse. 'Here, you do not need this.

Then Buddy staggered through the door, now supporting pale-looking Lee Stevens, another boy in our biology class. Melvin and I backed up to the wall to give them space.

'Oh no,' Melvin mumbled. 'Go to the office, Lilla.'

I looked at him in confusion.

'Trust me - go for it.'

I turned and grabbed the door before it closed and walked out

of the infirmary. I could feel Melvin behind me.

'You really listened to me.' I was stunned.

'I smelled blood,' I said, wrinkling my nose. I have never been tired of looking at others like me.

Contradiction- 'People can't smell blood.'

'Well, I can...that is what makes me sick. It smells of rust...and salt.'

He stared at me with an inscrutable expression.

'What or what?' I asked.

'It's nothing.'

Buddy walked through the door and looked at me at Melvin. The look he gave Melvin confirmed what Melvin had said about hate. He looked at me, his eyes shining.

'You look better,' he charged.

I warned him again, 'Just put your hand in your pocket.

'It's not bleeding anymore,' he muttered. 'Are you going back to class?

'You're kidding? I just must turn around and go again.

'Yeah, I guess... So, you are going this weekend? To the beach?' As he spoke, he shot another look at Melvin, who stood before the crowded table, motionless as a statue, staring off into space.

I tried to be as friendly as possible. 'Of course, I said I existed.'

'We meet at my father's store at ten o'clock. Her eyes fell on Melvin again, wondering if he was giving away too much information. His body language made it clear that this was not an open invitation.

I promised, 'I'll be there.'

'I'll see you at the gym,' he said, anxiously heading for the door.

I replied 'Goodbye.' He looked at me again, his round face frowning slightly, then as he slowly walked through the door, his shoulders slumped. A wave of

sympathy washed over me. I thought I saw his frustrated face again... at the gym.

'Gym' sighed.

'I can take care of it.' I did not notice Melvin moving beside me, but now he was talking in my ear. He muttered, 'Go sit down and look pale.'

It was not a challenge. I was still pale, and my last faint had left a faint streak of sweat on my face. I sat down in one of the folding chairs, creaking and leaning my head

against the wall, my eyes closed. Fainting always bothered me.

I heard Melvin speaking quietly at the table.

'Mrs. Ashmore?'

'Yes?' I did not hear her return to her office

'Lilla has a gym for the next hour, and I do not think she is in good enough shape.

I was thinking of taking her home now. Do you think you can excuse her from class?' His voice was

like melting honey. I can imagine how dark his eyes would be.

'Do you need to be excused too, Melvin?' Mrs. Ashmore fluttered. Why can't I do that?

'No, I have Mrs. Zimmer, you wouldn't mind.'

She called me, 'Okay, everything has been taken care of. You feel better, Lilla.' I nodded weakly and knocked her slightly.

'Can you walk, or do you want me to hold you again?' Turning

his back to the receptionist, his expression became mocking.

'I'll walk.'

I stood up cautiously, and I was still fine. He held the door for me, his smile polite and his eyes scoffing. I walked out into the soft cold mist that was just beginning to fall. I felt so sweet - the first time I enjoyed the continuous moisture dripping from the sky - that I washed my face clean of sticky sweat.

I told him as he followed me- 'Thank you.' 'It almost pays to get sick to miss the gym.'

'At what time.' He was staring straight ahead, staring at the rain.

'So, are you going? This Saturday, I mean?' I wish he would, although that seemed unlikely. I could not film him loading into carpools with the rest of the kids from school; He did not belong to the same world. But just hoping it might

have given me the first tingle of enthusiasm I felt for a walk.

'Where are you all going, exactly?' He was still looking forward, expressionless.

'All the way to La Bouche, to the first beach.' I studied his face, trying to read it. His eyes seemed to narrow infinitely.

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye, smiling sarcastically. 'I don't really think I was invited.'

I sighed. 'I just invited you.'

'Let you and I not push poor Buddy any more this week. We do not want him to attack.' His eyes danced. He was enjoying the idea too much.

Buddy Schmeck. She muttered, busy with the way he said 'You and I' I loved him more than I should.

We were near the parking lot now. I swerved and left towards my car. Something grabbed my jacket and set me back.

'Where do you think you're going?' he asked angrily. He was holding in one hand a handful of my jacket.

I was confused. 'I'm going home.'

'Didn't you hear my promise to take you home safely? Do you think I will let you drive on your condition?' His voice was still angry.

'What condition? What about my car?' I complained.

'I'll have Naddalin Natalie leave him after school.' He was pulling me toward his car now, pulling me out of my jacket. It was all I could do to prevent falling backward. He would pull me over anyway if I did.

'Then leave it!' I insisted. He ignored me. I staggered along either side of the wet pavement until we got to the Volvo. Then he finally freed me - I stumbled into the passenger door.

'You are so pushy!' Grumbled.

'It's open,' he replied. Get down on the driver's side.

'I am perfectly capable of driving myself home!' I stood next to the car, smoking. It was raining heavily now, and I had never lifted my headgear, so my hair was falling out on my back.

He lowered the motorized window and leaned across the seat towards me. 'Come in, Lilla.'

I did not answer. I was mentally calculating my chances of getting to the car before he could catch me. I had to admit they were not particularly good.

- And-

Then he threatened him, guessing my plan, 'I will pull you back.'

I tried to keep my dignity when I got in his car. I was not phenomenally successful - I looked like a half- soaked cat with my shoes squeaking.

'It's absolutely unnecessary,' I said stiffly.

did not answer. He fiddled with the controls, raised the heater, and turned off the music. As he was pulling out of the parking lot, I was preparing to give him the silent treatment- my face in a full frown- but then I got to know the music playing, and my curiosity improved my intentions.

Claire de Lune? I asked, surprised.

'Do you know Debussy?' He also seemed surprised.

'Not well,' she admitted. 'My mom plays a lot of classical music around the house - I only know my favorite.'

'It's one of my favorite things, too.' He stared at the rain, lost in thought.

I listened to the music relaxing on the light gray leather seat. It was impossible not to respond to the familiar and relaxed melody. The rain obliterated

everything outside the window, turning into gray and green smudges. I began to realize that we were going too fast; The car was moving steadily, evenly, although I did not feel the speed. Only the town in which he flashed gave it.

'What is your mother like?' He asked me suddenly.

I peeked to see him studying me with curious eyes.

I told her, 'She looks a lot like me, but prettier.' raising his eyebrows. 'I have a lot of Charlie

inside of me. She is more outgoing than me, and more courageous. She is irresponsible and a little weird, and she is an unpredictable chef. She is my best friend.' I have stopped. Talking about her was making me depressed.

'How old are you, Lilla?' His voice sounded frustrated for some reason I could not imagine. He parked the car, and I realized we were already at Charlie's house. The rain was so heavy that I could barely

see the house at all. It was as if the car was submerged under the river.

I answered him, confused- 'I am sixteen.'

'You don't look like you're seventeen.'

His tone was painful. It made me laugh.

'What or what?' Then he asked, curious again.

'My mom always says that I was born 34 and that I'm middle-aged more every year.' I laughed

then sighed. 'Well, someone must be an adult.' I stopped for a moment. I pointed out, 'You don't look like a junior high school student.' And having John Jackson pulling my pigtails all day long.'

He made a face and changed the subject.

'Why did your mother marry an elephant?'

I was surprised he would remember the name. I only mentioned it once, about two months ago. It took me a minute to respond.

'Mom…she is too young for her age. Deann makes her feel younger. Anyway, she is crazy about him.' I shook my head. The attraction was a mystery to me.

'Um do you agree?' Asked.

'Does it matter?' responded. 'I want her to be happy… which is who she wants.'

'That's very generous… I wonder,' he pondered.

'What or what?'

'Would you give the same courtesy to you, do you think? No matter who your choice was?' He was suddenly intending, his eyes looking at me.

'I think so,' she muttered. 'But she is the mother. It is a little different.'

'No one is so scary,' he quipped.

She smiled broadly in response. 'What do you mean by scary? Multiple facial piercings and blanket tattoos?'

'That's one definition, I think.'

'What is your definition?'

But he ignored my question and asked me another. 'Do you think I might be scared?' He raised one eyebrow, his faint smile lit up.

I thought for a moment wondering if the truth or the lie would end better. I decided to go with the truth. 'Hmmm… I think you could be if you wanted to.'

'Are you afraid of me now?' The smile disappeared and his celestial face suddenly became serious.

'The number.' But I answered very quickly. The smile is back.

'So, are you going to tell me about your family?' She asked to distract him. 'It should be a more interesting story than mine.'

He was at once careful. 'What do you want to know?'

Collins adopted you? I checked.

'Yes.'

I hesitated for a moment. 'What happened to your parents?'

They died many years ago. His tone was real.

She muttered, 'I'm sorry.'

'I do not remember them clearly. It has been Melchor and my dad's name for a long time now.'

'And you love them.' It was not a question. It was clear in the way he spoke about them.

'Yes.' Smile. 'I couldn't imagine two better people.'

'You are so lucky.'

'I know I am.'

'And your siblings?'

He looked at the clock on the dashboard.

'My brother, sister, Jae and Vivian for that matter, they would be

very upset if they had to stand in the rain waiting for me.'

'Oh, sorry, I think you should go.' I did not want to get out of the car.

'And maybe you want your car back before Chief Black gets home, so you don't have to tell him about the biology incident.' smile at me.

'I am sure he has already heard. There are no secrets in forex.' I sighed.

He laughed and there was no end to his laughter.

'Enjoy your time at the beach... good weather for sunbathing.' Look at the rain cover.

'Will I see you tomorrow?'

'No, Dejen and I start the weekend early.'

'What are you going to do?' A friend could ask that, right? I was hoping the disappointment was not so clear in my voice.

'We'll be hiking in Goat Rocks Wilderness, just south of Rainier.'

~*~

I remember Charlie said that Collins went camping often.

'Oh, well, have fun.' I tried to seem excited. I do not think I cheated him. A smile played on the edges of his lips.

'Are you going to do something for me this weekend?' He turned around to look me straight at

me, taking advantage of the full power of his glowing golden eyes.

I nodded helplessly.

'Don't be offended, but you seem to be one of those people who attract accidents like a magnet. So-o, try not to fall into the ocean or get run over or anything, okay?' Crooked smile.

The helplessness faded as he spoke. I stared at it.

'I'll see what I can do,' I picked myself up as I jumped into the

rain. I closed the door behind me with excessive force.

He was still smiling as he drove away from me.

7 Camp Firer

tried to focus on the third act of Macbeth, I listened to my car. I thought, driving in the rain, I could hear the roar of the engine. But when I went to look at the curtain - again - it was suddenly there.

I did not expect Friday, and this is more than I expected. Of

course, there were lame comments. Charity-Anna seems especially blessed by this story. Fortunately, Buddy kept his mouth shut and no one seemed to know about Melvin's involvement. She had many questions about lunch.

'So, what did Melvin Shezor want yesterday?' Charity-Anna asked Trigg.

'I don't know,' I answered honestly. 'He didn't really get to the point.'

'You were crazy,' she fished.

'Am I?' I picked up my speech.

'You know, I have never seen him sit with anyone but his family. It is weird.'

'Weird,' I agreed. She looked angry; she rubbed her dark curls patiently- I assumed she was hoping to hear something that would make a relevant story to tell.

The worst thing about Friday was that even though I knew he would not be there, I still hoped. When I walked into the cafeteria with Charity-Anna and Buddy, I could not help but look at the table where Vivian, Naddalin Natalie, and Jae were sitting. And when I saw it again, I realized that I did not know how long to wait, so I could not stop the darkness weighing on me.

At my usual table, everyone was busy with our plans for the next day. Buddy, again he was animated

and had great faith in the local weather which promised him sunshine tomorrow. I had to see it before I believed it. But it was hot today - about sixty. The departure was not so tragic.

During lunch, I got a few unfriendly looks from Emily, which I did not realize until we all left the room together. I stood behind her, just a foot from her straight, silver-blonde hair, and she did not know.

'...Lilla, you don't know why' - she teased my name - 'He

doesn't spend time together with the Shezor anymore.'

I heard her muttering to Buddy. It never occurred to me what a nasty voice she had, and I was surprised by the Naddalin Natalie in it. I really did not know her well, certainly not enough to hate me - or so I thought. 'She is my friend; She's staying with us,' Buddy whispered honestly, but with some girth. I stopped to let Anny and Jeannette pass me. I did not want to hear any more.

At dinner that evening, Charlie seemed curious about my trip to La Poch that morning. He feels guilty about leaving me home alone on weekends, but he has been breaking the habit for years. Of course, he knew the names of the kids who went, and their parents, and their dads. He seemed to approve. I wondered if he would approve of my plan to go to Altoona with Melvin Shezor. Not that I was going to tell him.

'Dad, you know a place called Goat Rocks or something? It is south of Mount Rainier,' I asked casually.

'Yes, why?'

I shrugged. 'Some kids were talking about camping there.'

'Not a good place to camp.' He looked surprised. 'A lot of bears, a lot of people go there during the hunting season.'

'Oh,' I muttered. 'Maybe I got the name wrong.'

I thought I was going to sleep, but I woke up with extraordinary clarity. I opened my eyes and saw a bright yellow light shining through my window. I could not believe it. I rushed to the window to look, and sure enough, the sun was there. It was in the wrong place in the sky, too low, and did not look as close as it should have been, but it was the sun.

Clouds surrounded the horizon, but a large blue spot appeared in the center. I stayed by

the window if I could, afraid the blue would disappear again if I let go.

Newton's Olympic clothing store was north of town. I saw the store but did not stop there - I had little interest in the supplies that needed to be out for a long time. I spotted Buddy's Suburban and Tyler's chin in the parking lot. When I stopped by their vehicles, I saw the group standing in front of the suburbs. J.A was there, I had a room with two other guys; I was sure their names were Chiaz and Joseph Shaw.

Anny was there, next to Jeannette and Emily. Three other girls were standing next to them, including one that I remember going into the gym on Friday. She gave me a dirty look as I got out of the car and whispered something to Emily. Emily shook her corn silk hair and looked at me with disdain.

So, this will be one of those days.

At least Buddy was happy to see me.

'You have arrived!' He cried with joy. 'And I said it would be sunny today, didn't I?'

'I told you to come,' I reminded him.

'We're just waiting for Lee and Rebeca... unless they invite someone,' Buddy added.

'No,' I lied a little, hoping I would not be caught in a lie. But he wishes for a miracle, and Melvin appears.

Buddy looks pleased.

'Will you show up in my car? This van or Lee's mother.

'Naturally.'

He smiled happily. It was extremely easy to please Buddy.

'You can carry a gun,' he promised. I hid my anger. It was not easy to please Buddy and Charity-Anna at the same time. Now I see Charity-Anna beaming at us.

However, the numbers worked for me. Lee brought two more people and suddenly every seat

was important. I put Anny in the front seat of the Suburban between Buddy and me. Buddy could have been nicer about it, but at least Anny seemed calm.

It was only fifteen miles from the fork to La Poch, with beautiful, dense green forests covering most of the road and the wide Quilt River that sank twice beneath it. I was glad I had the window seat. We rolled down the windows - the Suburban was a little claustrophobic with nine people in it

- and I tried to take in as much sunlight as possible.

I had often walked the beaches around La Poche with Charlie during the McAuley winter, so the miles of First Beach seemed familiar. It was still fun. The water was dark gray, even in the sunlight, with a white coating and a gray, rocky shore. The islands protruded from the waters of the steel port from clear cliffs to harsh heights and were crowned with a spectacular view. The beach had only a thin

fringe of sand at the water's edge, behind which lay millions of large, smooth stones that from a distance looked a uniform gray, but up close they could have been stone of any shade- terracotta, sea green, lavender., blue- gray, dull gold. The tide line was dotted with large floating trees, white sharp in the salt tide, some huddled at the edge of the forest, some alone, out of the reach of the tide.

A cool, fresh wind came from the storm. Pelicans soar above

the swell, and seagulls and a lone eagle circle overhead. The clouds still surrounded the sky and threatened to invade at any moment, but now the sun shone boldly in the blue sky.

We went to the beach and Buddy led the way. There used to be a circle of fire filled with black ash. J.A and a boy I suspected were called Chiaz collected driftwood branches broken from dry piles at the edge of the forest and soon built a carpet-like structure on the old wooden floor.

'Have you ever seen a burning fire?' Buddy asked me. I sat on one of the bone-colored sofas; The other girls gathered on either side of me, gossiping excitedly. Buddy knelt by the fire and lit one of the small logs with a lighter.

'No,' I said as he carefully placed the shriveled branch on the tip.

'Then you'll like it- look at the colors.' Light another small branch and place it next to the first

one. Soon the fire began to lick the dry wood.

'It's blue,' I said in surprise.

'Salt does that. Nice, isn't it?' He lit another piece, placed it where the fire had not yet caught and sat down next to me. Fortunately, Anny was on the other side. She turned to him and demanded his attention. I watched the strange blue and green flames shoot into the sky.

After half an hour of discussion, some guys wanted to go

for a walk to the nearby pools. He was in a dilemma. On the one hand, I love tide pools. It has fascinated me since childhood; They were one of the things I looked forward to when I wanted to get split. On the other hand, I also fell for it more than once. It is okay if you are seven and with your dad. It reminded me of Melvin's question - do not fall into the sea.

Emily was the one who made my decision. She did not want to go for a walk, and she wore the

wrong shoes for it. Except for Jeannette and Charity-Anna, most of the other girls decided to stay on the beach. I waited for Tyler and J.A to promise to stay with them before I quietly left to join the walking group of fans. Buddy gave me a big smile when he saw me coming.

The walk was not too long, although I hated missing the forest air. The green light of the forest clashed with the laughter of the teenagers, too dark and uncoordinated with the flickering

light around me. I had to watch every step I took carefully, remove branches from the roots and tops, and quickly fell behind. Finally, I broke through the emerald edge of the forest and found the rocky shore again. The tide was low, and he passed the Thar River on his way out to sea. The gravel banks teemed with life in shallow pools of water that were never completely flooded.

I was incredibly careful not to lean too much on the small ocean pools. The others are not afraid,

jump the rocks, jump on the rocks. I found a very stable-looking rock at the edge of the large pools and sat there carefully, with the natural underwater magic below me. Bunches of bright anemones constantly dissolve in the invisible current, curved shells curl up to the ends, hiding the crabs in them, starfish from the rocks and motionless from each other, and a small black eel with white racing stripes weaves in bright green grasses., waiting for the return of the

sea. I was completely engrossed except for a small part of my mind that wondered what Melvin was doing right now and I tried to imagine what he would say if he was here with me.

Finally, the boys were hungry, and I quickly left to follow them. This time I tried to walk better in the forest, so of course, I fell a few times. I have superficial scratches on my palms and the knees of my jeans have turned green, but it could be worse.

On the way back to First Beach, the group we left behind was packed. As we got closer, we could see the sleek black hair and copper skin of the new arrivals, young people from the reservation came to socialize.

The food was already distributed, and J.A introduced us as we each entered the driftwood as the children rushed to ask for a share. Jeannette and I were the last to arrive, and as J.A said our names, I saw a little boy sitting on the rocks

by the fire looking at me with interest. I sat down next to Jeannette and Buddy brought us sandwiches and some soda. A boy, who turned out to be the oldest of the visitors, destroyed the names of his seven companions. What I saw was that one of the girls was named Charity-Anna, and the boy who noticed me was named Chiaz.

Sitting with Jeannette was relaxing; She was an easy person to be around - she did not feel the need to fill her silence with talk. She let

me think without worrying while we ate. And I thought about how time is split into McAuley, sometimes passing in a blur, individual images that stand out more than others. Then, in a moment, every second was important, etched in my memory. I knew exactly what made the difference, and it bothered me.

At noon, the clouds began to move in, gliding across the blue sky, casting a moment against the sun, casting long shadows on the beach and the waves crashing. After

they finished eating, the people split into twos and threes and lay down. Some of them climbed to the top of the wave and tried to jump over the rocks. Others packed for a second trip to the tide pools. Buddy - with Charity-Anna's shadow - goes shopping in the village. Some local children went with them; Others went for a walk. By the time they all parted, I was alone in the trees, Emily and Tyler holding a CD player someone had brought them, and three teenagers, including a boy

named Chiaz, sitting in a circle. The eldest son was the speaker.

A few minutes after

Jeannette left with the passengers, Chiaz went to pick her up from my side. He looked fourteen, fifteen, and had long, shiny black hair in a bun at the back of his neck. His skin was beautiful, silky, and reddish brown; His eyes darkened above the high planes of his cheeks. There was still a trace of youth around his chin. Overall, an unbelievably beautiful face. However, my positive judgment

about my appearance was damaged by the first words that came out of his mouth.

'You're Lill Natalie-Black, aren't you?'

It was like the first day of school all over again.

'Lilla,' I said.

'I'm Chiaz Naztherth.' He extended his hand in a friendly gesture. 'You bought my dad's car.'

'Oh,' I said with relief and shook his elegant hand. 'You're Mr. Black 's son. I should remind you.

No, I am the youngest in the family - you remember my older sisters.' 'Elizabeth and Becky,' I suddenly remembered. Charlie and Mr. Black stopped by several times during my visit to keep us busy while fishing. We were all too shy to move forward as friends. Of course, by the time I was 11, I had enough tantrums to go on fishing trips.

'Are they here?' I asked the girls by the ocean if I recognized them now.

'No.' Chiaz shook his head. 'Elizabeth got a scholarship to Washington State and Becky married a Samoan minister - now lives in Hawaii.'

'Wow, she's married,' I panicked. The twins were only a little over a year older than me.

'So how do you like the car?' He asked.

'I love it. It works great.'

'Yes, but it's too slow,' he laughed. 'I was happy when Charlie bought it. Even though we had a great car there, my father would not let me build another car.'

'Not so slow,' I said.

'Did you try to go over sixty?'

'I did not say.

'Well. Do not,' he smiled.

I could not help but smile back. 'It's great in a crash,' I offered with the bumper of my car.

'I don't think it's a monster sleeper that a tank can knock,' he agreed, laughing again.

'So, you make cars?' I asked in surprise.

'If I have time to spare and if I have parts. Do you happen to know I can get an expert cylinder for a 1956 Cadillac?' he added with a laugh. He had a pleasant, hoarse voice.

'Sorry,' I laughed, 'I haven't seen anything lately, but I'll keep your eyes open.' Like I knew what it was. He was amazingly easy to talk to.

He gave me a beautiful smile as he looked at me with admiration as I understood. I was not the only one who noticed.

'Do you know Lilla, Chiaz?' Emily asked - with what I thought was a volcano - from the fire.

'We've known each other since I was born,' he said, smiling back at me.

'How nice.' She did not feel any better and her pale, fishy eyes narrowed. 'Lilla,' she called again, looking intently at my face, 'I told Tyler it is too bad none of the speakers can go out today. No one remembered to invite them?' Her concern was ambiguous.

'Do you mean Dr. Melchor Shezor's family?' The tall, older boy asked without an answer, much to

Emily's dismay. He was closer to the boy than the boy, and his voice was very deep.

'Yes, do you know them?' she asked, turning to him in the middle of the road.

The Shezor do not come here,' she said in a dismissive tone and ignored her question.

Tyler tries to get her attention and asks Emily about the CD in his hand. She was distracted.

I stared at Matfield, who was staring into the dark forest behind us. He said the Shezor did not come here, but His tone showed something else- they were not allowed. They were forbidden. His attitude made a strange impression on me, and I tried in vain to ignore it.

Chiaz interrupted my meditation. 'So, McAuley are already driving you crazy?'

'Oh, I would say that is an understatement. I was upset. He smiled deliberately.

I was still flipping through the short notes on Shezor and suddenly I was inspired. It was a stupid plan, but I did not have a better idea.' He hoped that young Chiaz was new to girls so he would not see my flirting as a pathetic attempt to be safe.

'Do you want to come to the beach with me?' I asked, mimicking Melvin's lead. I looked down at his eyelids. It could not have made any difference, I am sure, but Chiaz jumped willingly.

As we crossed the reef to the north and headed toward the floating ocean wall, the clouds finally settled in the sky, causing the sea to darken and the temperature to drop. I put my hands in my coat pockets.

'So, what Are you sixteen?' I asked, fluttering my eyelashes the way I had seen girls on TV, trying not to look stupid.

'I'm only fifteen,' he admitted flattered.

'Really?' My face was full of false surprise. 'I thought you were older.'

'I'm tall for my age,' he explained.

'Do you come to Forex a lot?' I asked deeply as if I hoped so. I felt stupid to myself. I was afraid he would turn on me in horror and accuse me of cheating, but he still looked cute.

'Not too much,' he said sullenly. 'But once I'm done with my car, I can go out as many times as I

want- after I get my driver's license,' he added.

'Who was that other boy that Emily was talking to? He looks like a little old man walking around with us.' I deliberately put myself in favor of the young people to make it clear that I would choose Chiaz.

'It's Sam - he's nineteen,' he informed me.

'What was it about the doctor's family?' I asked.

'The Shezor? Oh, they should not come to the reservation.' A voice confirming what I heard on Pierre Island outside shouted.

'Why not?'

He bit me and looked back at me. 'A proper kidnapping.'

'Oh, I won't tell anyone, it's just curiosity.'

He replied, but he looked charming. One eyebrow raised and his voice was huskier than before.

'Awesome, do you like it?' asked

'I love them' I tried to smoke him.

He went to a nearby floating tree. While I was sitting on the trunk of the tree at one of the twisted roots of the stone, I saw that he was trying to do good with a wide smile on his lips. I focused on keeping a vital need out of my sight.

'Where did we come from -

'Of course, not'

'Well, there are many legends, some of which say that they were before the flood - like Noah and his ark to survive, the ancient Quilts tied their ark to the top of the tall trees on the mountain. smiled... Another legend from wolves as we came to the wolves still our brothers are killing.

'The different one.'

'The cold ones?' I asked for my phone now without hesitation.

'Yes. As a wolf, legends as old as the cold ones, and some very

recent ones. According to legend, an ancestor knew some of them. The contract was from you know.

'Your grandfather?' I encouraged her, 'Like my father, I was an elder of the clan. You see, the cold ones of the wolf's pit are natural enemies, not wolves, but like our ancestors, they are wolves that change bodies. Wolves.'

'Rumor, do they have wolves?'

'Just one'

I will change impatience to admiration,

'So, you see,' Chiaz continued, 'the Qazaqs are traditionally our enemies. When my great- great- grandfather came to our region, this pack was different. They were not like the others - they should not be dangerous to his tribe. So, my grandfather made a promise. To stay away If you make a promise if you promise if you promise if you promise if you promise if you promise we were he said.' 'Do you have an

answer for 'Kidnapping...?' to understand without struggling You do not know how seriously I take his obituary, and when am stupid enough to protest. 'Deliberately, he made a thick threat in his voice.

'What are you saying? said they did not hunt a person. It is thought that they were able to hunt animals.

I tried to relax my voice.' So how will he fit in with Shezor? Is your grandfather cold as I found them?'

'No' he said surprisingly and paused 'They are the same too'

He must not have thought that the expression on my face was fear due to the story. he said, happy, and continued.

'Now there are more new women and new men than them, but the rest are the same. In my great-great- grandfather's time, they already knew the leader Melchor. Before your men arrived here, he left.' Struggling...

'And what are they?' I asked him 'What are the cold ones?'

'Nah' I thanked him, still seeing the storm.

'You need not wonder my father doesn't want us to tell anyone about this.'

I still have not been able to control my emotions to see him.' Do not worry, I will not give you 'I only broke the contract' he laughed.

'I'll take him to the grave' I promised I was shaking but nothing to Charlie...

.... Do not say do not say anything Ever since Dr. Shezor started working there when he heard that some of us were not going to the hospital my father was very.

A group of indigenous people or what?' Kana asked in a playful tone, but with a worried feeling. I still did not look away from the ocean. I turned around as much

as I could and smiled as usual and said...

'No. But you are incredibly good at telling scary stories. I still have goose bumps, see?'

'Awesome.'

The sound of rocks screeching against each other on the beach alerted us that someone was approaching. Fifty yards away, Buddy and Charity-Anna could be seen walking toward us.

'Hey Lilla,' Buddy called out in relief, waving his hand over his head.

'Is that your boyfriend?' Buddy asked with an edge of jealousy in him, understanding. Voice- I was surprised that it was so clear.

'No, of course.'

'You should come in and see me. Sometimes I felt guilty when I spoke, that I was taking advantage of him. He was simply someone I would be friends with.

He smiled swarthy.

'Blood drinkers,' he replied in a cold voice. 'Your people call them vampires.'

I looked at the rough surf after he answered, not sure what my face was showing.

'You're making a mess of it,' he chuckled happily.

'You're a good storyteller,' I told her, still staring at the storm.

'But it is crazy, isn't it? No wonder my father does not want us to tell anyone about it.'

I still could not control my emotions to see him. 'Don't worry, I won't sell you.'

'I just broke the contract,' he laughed.

'I will take him to the grave,' I promised, then I panicked.

'Seriously, don't say anything to Charlie.' He was incredibly angry with my father when

he heard that some of us were not going to the hospital since Dr. Shezor started working there.

'Of course, I won't.'

'So, you think we're superstitious natives or what?' he asked in a playful tone, but with some menace. I still have not looked down from the ocean.

I turned and smiled at him as usual.

No. You are particularly good at telling horror stories. I still have bumps, see? I raised my arm.

'Thats nice.' He smiled.

Then the sound of stones crashing against each other on the beach warned us that someone was approaching. We looked up at the same time to see Buddy and Charity-Anna walking towards us about fifty yards away.

'Here, Lilla,' Buddy shouted in relief, waving a hand over his head.

'Is he your friend?' Chiaz asked, understanding the jealousy in Buddy's voice. I was surprised that it was so clear.

'No, definitely not,' I whispered. I am extremely grateful to Chiaz and cannot wait to please him as much as possible. To do so, I carefully turned away from Buddy and glared at him. He smiled, enjoying my naughty flirtation.

'So, when I got my driver's license...' he began.

'You should come to my place in McAuley.' We can spend time together sometime. I felt guilty saying this knowing that I had taken advantage of him. But I loved Chiaz very much. He was someone I could easily be friends with.

Buddy came towards us; Charity-Anna took a few steps back. I saw his eyes appraising Chiaz, happy in his youth.

'Where have you been?' He asked even though the answer was right in front of him.

'Chiaz was telling me some local stories,' I volunteered. 'It was a lot of fun.'

I smiled warmly at Chiaz, and he smiled back.

'Okay,' Buddy paused, assessing the situation carefully as he looked at our friends. 'We're packing - looks like it's going to rain soon.'

We all looked up at the bright sky. It really looked like rain.

'All right.' I jumped. 'To come.'

'Nice to see you again,' Chiaz said, and I knew he was teasing Buddy a little.

'Of course, it was. The next time Charlie comes to visit Mr. Black, I will come too,' I promised.

A smile spread across his face. 'It would be great.'

'And thank you,' I added seriously.

I lifted the hood as we kicked the rocks into the parking lot. A few drops began to fall, forming a black stain on the stones where they landed. By the time we got to the outskirts of town the others had already packed everything back up. I climbed into the back seat next to Jeannette and Tyler and announced it was my turn at the gun range. Jeannette looked out the window at the intensifying storm and Emily turned around in the middle seat to get Tyler's attention and I just leaned

my head back against the seat and closed my eyes and tried hard not to think.

8 BAD DREAMS

I told Charlie I had a lot of homework and did not want to eat anything. He was excited about the basketball game, although, of course, I had no idea there was anything special about it, so he did not notice anything unusual in my face or tone.

Once in my room, I locked the door. I rummaged through my office until I found my old

headphones and plugged them into my little CD player. I picked up the CD that Deann gave me for Christmas. It was one of his favorite bands, but they used too much bass and screaming for my taste. I put it in place and lay down on the bed. I put on my headphones, pressed play, and turned up the volume until my ears hurt. I closed my eyes, but the light kept coming in, so I added a pillow to the top half of my face.

I concentrated very intensely on the music, trying to

understand the lyrics, to decipher the complex drum patterns. By the third time I listened to the CD, I knew at least all the lyrics to the choruses. I was surprised to find that I ended up liking the band once I got past the chatter. I still must thank Phil.

And it worked. The devastating blows kept me thinking - which was the main purpose of the exercises. I listened to the CD over and over until I sang all the songs until finally fell asleep.

I opened my eyes to a familiar place. Knowing in a corner of my mind that I was dreaming, I recognized the green light of the forest. I could hear the waves crashing against the rocks somewhere nearby. And I knew if I found the ocean, I could see the sun. I tried to follow the sound, but then there was Chiaz Naztherth, who tugged at my arm, pulling me back into the darkest part of the forest.

'Chiaz? What happened? I asked. His face was terrified as he

pulled with all his might against my resistance; I did not want to go into the dark.

'Run Lilla, you have to run!' - he whispered frightened.

'This way Lilla!' I recognized Buddy's voice calling from the dark heart of the trees, but I could not see it.

'Why?' I asked, still reaching for Chiaz's hands, desperate to find the sun.

But Chiaz let go of my hand and, with a cry, suddenly trembled, falling to the dark forest floor. He was writhing on the ground, and I stared at him in horror.

- Ah! I screamed. But he was not there. In his place was a large red-brown wolf with black eyes. The wolf turned away from me, pointing towards the shore, the fur on its shoulders bristling, a low growl coming from its bared fangs.

- Lilla, run! Buddy shouted behind me again. But I did not turn

back. I watched the light come towards me from the beach.

- And-

Then Melvin came out from behind the trees, his skin barely glistening, his eyes black and dangerous. He raised his hand and motioned for me to come to him. The wolf growled at my feet.

I took a step forward, toward Melvin. He smiled then, and his teeth were sharp, pointy.

'Trust me,' he purred.

I took another step.

The wolf lunged into the space between me and the vampire, its fangs aiming at the collarbone.

- Nope! I screamed as I jumped out of bed.

My sudden movement knocked the earphones from the CD player off the bedside table and it fell to the floor with a thud.

I always had the light on, and I was sitting fully clothed on the bed with my shoes on. I glanced at

the clock on the dresser, confused. It was half past five in the morning.

I moaned, fell back, and fell flat on my stomach, kicking off my boots. However, I was too uncomfortable to go to sleep. I turned around and unzipped my jeans, tugging them awkwardly as I tried to stay level. I could feel a braid in my hair, an uncomfortable ridge along my scalp. I turned on my side and tugged on the elastic, quickly running my fingers through my

braids. I pulled the pillow over my eyes again.

It was all pointless, of course. My subconscious dug up the very images I was trying so desperately to avoid. I had to face them now.

I sat up and my head felt dizzy for a minute as the blood flowed. First, I thought, happy to put it back on for as long as possible. I grabbed my bag from the bathroom.

However, the shower did not last as long as I had hoped. Even

after taking the time to dry my hair, I soon ran out of things to do in the bathroom. Wrapping myself in a towel, I returned to my room. I could not tell if Charlie was still sleeping or if he was already gone. I went to look out the window and the cruiser was gone. Fish again.

I slowly put on my comfiest sweatpants, then made my bed - something I have never done. I could not live without it. I walked to my office and turned on my old computer.

I hated using the internet here. My modem was unfortunately outdated, and free services - were inferior quality; just plugging it in took so long that I decided to get myself a bowl of cereal while I waited.

I ate slowly, chewing each bite carefully. When I was done, I washed the bowl and the spoon, dried them, and put them away. My legs were dragging as I climbed the stairs. First, I walked over to my CD player, picked it up off the floor, and

placed it squarely in the center of the table. I took out my headphones and put them in the desk drawer. Then I played the same CD, reducing it to the point where it was background noise.

Sighing again, I returned to my computer. Naturally, the screen was covered with pop- up advertisements. I sat down in my stiff folding chair and started closing all the little windows. Eventually, I got to my favorite search engine. I shot a

few more pop- ups, then typed a word.

Vampire.

Of course, it took a long time. When the results came in, there was a lot to sift through, from movies and TV shows to RPGs, underground metal companies, and gothic cosmetics.

Then I found a promising site - Vampires 101. I waited impatiently for it to load, quickly shutting down any ads that popped up on the screen. Finally, the screen

was done - a simple white background with black text, and an academic look. Two quotes greeted me on the homepage

In all the vast mysterious world of ghosts and demons, there is no character so terrifying, no character so feared and hated, but so horribly admired, as the vampire, who is not himself a ghost, nor demon., but who partakes of dark natures and has the mysterious and terrifying qualities of both? - Reverend Montague Summers.

If there is a well-documented history in this world, it is that of vampires. Nothing is missing minutes, sworn statements by famous people, surgeons, priests, and magistrates; the forensic evidence is the most complete. And with all that, who believes in vampires? - Rousseau.

The rest of the site was an alphabetical listing of all the different vampire myths that exist in the world. The first one I clicked on, Danang, was a Filipino vampire

allegedly responsible for planting taro in the islands long ago. The myth had it that Dunag had worked with humans for years, but the partnership ended one day when a woman cut her finger and Dunag sucked on the wound, enjoying the taste so much that he completely emptied his body.

I read the descriptions carefully, looking for anything that sounded familiar, let alone believable. Most vampire myths seemed to center on beautiful women

as demons and children as victims; they also seemed to be constructs created to explain the high death rate of young children and to give men an excuse for infidelity. Many stories involve disembodied spirits and warnings against improper burials. Few resembled the movies I had seen, and only a few, like the Hebrew Estray and the Polish Upper, were even concerned with drinking blood.

Only three entries caught my attention the Variolas from

Romania, a powerful undead creature that could appear as a pale-skinned handsome man, and the Nilasi from Slovakia, a creature so strong and fast it could kill a village whole in an hour after midnight., and another, Stergion benefice.

There was only a short sentence about the latter.

Stergion benefices An Italian vampire said to be on the side of good and the mortal enemy of all evil vampires.

It was a relief to have a little record, a myth among hundreds claiming the existence of good vampires.

In general, however, little matched Chiaz's accounts or my observations. As I read, I made a little catalog in my mind and carefully compared it with each myth. Speed, strength, beauty, pale skin, eyes that change color; then Chiaz's criteria bloodsuckers, werewolf enemies, cold skins, and immortals. There were very few

myths that corresponded to a single factor.

And another problem I remember from the few horror movies I have seen that was reinforced by today's reading - vampires could not come out during the day, the sun would burn them to ashes. They slept in coffins all day and only came out at night.

Exasperated, I turned off the computer's main switch without waiting for everything to turn off properly. Through my irritation, I felt

extreme embarrassment. Everything was so stupid. I was sitting in my room researching vampires. What is wrong with me? I have decided that most of the blame lies with the city gates of McAuley - and the entire wet Olympic Peninsula for that matter.

I had to leave home, but I did not want to go anywhere except on a three- day trip. I put my boots on anyway, not knowing where I was going, and went down. I put on my raincoat, oblivious to the weather, and tapped on the door.

It was cloudy, but it had not rained yet. I ignored my car and headed east on foot, cutting an angle across Charlie's yard toward the woods that kept coming. Soon I was so sunk that you could not see the house or the road, you could only hear the lapping of the wet ground under my feet and the sudden cries of a jay.

There was a thin sliver of the path through the forest here, otherwise, I would not have risked wandering like this on my own. My

sense of direction was hopeless; I could get lost in a much less useful environment. The path went deeper and deeper into the forest, mostly to the east as far as I could tell. It coiled like a snake around the Sticha firs, hemlocks, yews, and maples. I only vaguely knew the names of the trees around me, and all I knew was thanks to Charlie pointing them out to me from the cruiser window earlier. Many I did not know and some I could not be sure of because they were covered in green pests.

I followed the trail as my anger at myself pushed me forward. When it started to go down, I slowed down. A few drops of moisture trickled down from the canopy above me, but I could not be sure if it had started to rain or if it were just puddles left over from the day before, high in the leaves above me, slowly falling back to the field. A recently fallen tree - I knew it was new as it was not completely covered in moss - rested against the trunk of one of its sisters, creating a

sheltered bench a few feet up the trail. I stepped over the fern and carefully sat down, making sure my jacket was between the wet seat and my clothes wherever it touched, and leaned my hooded head against the living tree.

This was not where we came from. I should have known, but where else was there to go? The forest was a rich green and too peaceful like last night's scene. Now that my wet footsteps could no longer be heard, the silence was

piercing. The birds were also calm, the drops were increasing, so it must have been raining overhead. The fern was over my head now that I was seated, and I knew someone could pass in the way, within a yard of me, and not see me.

Here in the trees, it was much easier to believe the nonsense that baffled me inside. Nothing had changed in this forest for thousands of years, and all the myths and legends from hundreds of different

countries seemed much more likely in this green mist than in my room.

I forced myself to focus on the two most important questions that needed to be answered, but I did so reluctantly.

First, I had to decide if it was possible that what Chiaz had said about the Shezor was true.

My mind at once reacted with a sharp negative. It is senseless and painful to think of such ridiculous notions. But what then? I asked myself. There was no rational

explanation for how I was alive at that time. I told in my head what I had seen incredible speed and strength, the color of the eyes changing from black to gold

and vice versa, an inhuman beauty, a pale and cold skin. And more - the trivial things that slowly spread - how they never seemed to eat, the uncanny grace with which they moved. And so, as they sometimes say, unfamiliar cadences and phrasing are better suited to the style of a turn- of- the- century novel

than a 21st- century classroom. He skipped class the day we did the blood test. He would not turn down a trip to the beach until he heard where we were going. He knew what everyone around him was thinking...except me. He told me he was mean, dangerous...

Could the Shezor be vampires?

Well, they were something. Before my disbelieving eyes, something beyond the possibility of rational justification was happening.

Melvin Shezor was not...human, whether it was cold Chiaz or my superhero theory. He was something more.

So - it is possible. That should be my answer for now.

- And-

Then the most important question of all. What was I going to do if it was true?

If Melvin were a vampire - I could barely bring myself to think of the words - then what should I do? It

was certainly not possible to involve someone else. I could not even believe it myself; anyone I talked to about it would hire me.

Only two options seemed practical. The first thing is to listen to his advice, be smart and avoid him as much as possible. Cancel our plans, go back to ignoring him as much as possible. Imagine there is an impenetrable wall of glass between us in the same classroom where we were forced together. Tell him to

leave me alone - and seriously this time.

A sudden agony of despair washed over me as I considered this alternative. My mind dismissed the pain, quickly moving on to the next choice.

I could not do anything else. If he was anything...sinister, he had not hurt me so far. I would have been a hole in Tyler's wing if he had not acted so quickly. So quickly I argued that it could be pure reflexes. But if it were a reflex to save lives,

how bad could it be? - I replied. My head was spinning with no response.

I was sure of one thing when I was sure of everything. The dark Melvin in my dream last night was only a reflection of my fear of the word Chiaz said, not of Melvin himself. Even so, when I screamed in terror at the werewolf's attack, it was not the fear of the wolf that brought the cry of 'no' to my lips. It was the fear that he would be hurt - even as he called out to me with his sharp fangs, I feared for him.

- And-

Then I knew I had my answer. I did not know if there was ever a choice. I was already too deep. Now that I knew - if I knew - there was nothing I could do about my terrible secret. Because when I thought of him, his voice, his hypnotic eyes, the magnetic power of his personality, I wanted nothing more than to be with him right now. Even if... but I could not think that. Not here, alone in the darkening forest. While the rain darkened it like

twilight under the canopy and beat like footsteps on the dull earthen floor. I shivered and quickly got up from my hiding place, fearing that the trail would somehow disappear with the rain.

But there it was, safe and clean, appearing from the dripping green maze. I rushed after him, my hood pulled over my face, surprised to almost run through the trees in the distance. I started to wonder if I was going at all, or if I was following the path further into the forest.

However, before I could panic, I started to see open spaces through the webbed branches. And then I heard a car speeding down the street and I was free, Charlie's lawn stretched out before me, the house beckoned me with the promise of warmth and dry socks.

It was just after noon when I went inside. I went upstairs and dressed for the day, jeans, and a T-shirt since I was staying home. It did not take much effort to focus on my task for the day, the Macbeth article

due Wednesday. I just tackled the draft, calmer than I had felt since… well, Thursday, to be honest.

However, that has always been my path. Making decisions was a painful part for me, a part I suffered from. But once the decision was made, I stuck with it, relieved that the choice was made. Sometimes the relief was tinged with despair, like my decision to come to McAuley. But it was still better than struggling with the alternatives.

This decision was ridiculously easy to live with. Dangerously easy.

- And-

So, the day turned out calm and productive - I finished my work before eight o'clock. Charlie came home with a big catch, and I remembered that I would be in Altoona the following week to pick up a fish cookbook.

The shivers that ran down my spine every time I thought of that trip were no different from the ones I

felt before going for a walk with Chiaz Naztherth. They must be different, I thought.

They disagree, I think. I am afraid - I know I am afraid, but I do not feel the right fear.

I had no dreams that night, starting my day so early, and I slept so badly the night before it left me tired. Again, when he arrived at the McAuley, I awoke on a sunny day to bright yellow light. He jumped to the window, and I was surprised that there were hardly any clouds in the

sky, which were just small white fluffy bubbles, it could not be raining. I opened the window- - surprised by the silent opening, not sticking, not opening for years- - and drew in the dry air. It was warm and there was almost no wind. My veins are full of electricity.

Charlie was having breakfast when he came down, and he sensed my feelings at once.

'Good day,' he said.

'Yes,' I agree with a smile.

He was smiling back; his eyes were soft. When Charlie laughed, it was easier to understand why my premature wife and mother. Most of the romance of youth that had faded away in those days, before I knew it, my curly hair - my color, if not the same texture - had diminished, slowly becoming increasingly clear of her skin. forehead but when he smiles, I can see a little of the man who spoke to Allison when he was two years older than I am now.

I happily ate my lunch, watching the sunshine through the back window on the dusty ditch. Charlie said goodbye and I heard the cruiser leave the house. I hesitantly walked to the door and put my hand on the pan. Fate tries to leave the house. With a sigh, I folded my arm and stepped into the brightest light I had seen for months.

With a lot of challenging work, I was able to roll down the windows of both trucks completely. I was the first to get to school, I

hurried out the door without even looking at my watch. I parked the car and walked towards the rarely used picnic benches on the south side of the cafeteria. It was still a little damp in the seat, so I sat on my coat and was happy to use it. My homework is done - a product of a slow social life - but there are some trigonometry questions I am not sure if I am doing right. I carefully took out my book, but in examining my first day's dream, I saw the sun shining on the red bark of the tree. I drew casually

in the margin of the assignment. After a few minutes, I suddenly realized that I had seen five pairs of black eyes. I punched them out with the eraser.

'Lilla,' I heard someone call, as Buddy sounded.

I looked around and saw that the school was full, and I was sitting there without thinking. They all wore T- shirts, and some even wore pants, even though the temperature was not above sixty.

Buddy asks me in khaki pants and a striped football shirt.

'Hey Buddy,' I called, waving to him that he could not be away this morning.

He came to me sitting, shining the brightest gold in the light, and smiling on his face. He was so happy to see me, and I could not help the feeling.

'I've never noticed before - your hair is red,' he commented, pretending to have strands of hair fluttering in the breeze.

'Only in the sun.'

When he closed the lock behind his ear, I was a little uncomfortable.

'Isn't it a good day?'

'I like the day,' I agreed.

'What did you do yesterday?' His tone was a little more subtle.

'I spend most of my time writing my dissertation.' I did not add what I was doing - I did not need it to sound good.

He struck his forehead with the heel of his hand. 'Oh, yes - that's Thursday, right?'

'Come on, Wednesday, I think.'

'Mercury?' 'It's not good... what are you writing?'

'Is Shakespeare's treatment of female characters misogynistic.'

Looked at me like I just spoke in pig Latin.

'I think I'm going to have to work tonight,' he said deflated. 'I was going to ask if you wanted to go out.'

'Oh. 'I was caught off guard. Why can't I have a fun conversation with Buddy without being blocked anymore?

'Okay, we can go to dinner, or I can do something.' 'Buddy...' 'I hate putting there., wondering if his thoughts were here as well.

'I think...if you repeat what I'm saying now, I'll happily shoot you to death,' I threatened, 'but I think

Charity-Anna's feelings will be happy.

'Charity-Anna?'

'Really, Buddy, you're blind?'

'Oh,' she breathed dizziness. I used this to escape.

'It's time for class, I can't be late anymore.' I took my book away and put it in my bag.

walked in silence to building 3, his face a little distracted.

I hope he put whatever thoughts he had in the right way.

When I saw Charity-Anna in Trig, she was burning. She, Jeannette, and John are coming to Big Sur tonight to buy clothes for the show, and she wants me to come, although I do not need them. I doubt it. It is nice to be out of town with a few girlfriends, but Emily will be there. Who knows what I will do tonight... but it is the wrong way for my mind to wander. Of course, I am happy with the sun. But not exactly

to my euphoria at the time, not even close.

- And-

Then I gave him a chance and told him I would speak to Charlie first.

He was talking alone about dancing on the way to the Spanish, and when the class was finally over, he did not seem to stop, five minutes late, and on his way to lunch We were I noticed most of what he said. It is not just him, but all the Shezor family that I desperately want to see

- bringing them to the new doubts that haunt me. As I entered the threshold of the dining room, the first real sting of fear slides down my spine and settles in my stomach. Do they know what I am thinking? Then I had another feeling - will Melvin wait to sit me down again?

As is my custom, I first looked at the Shezor' desk. I shuddered in my stomach when I realized it was empty. With hope fading, I scanned the rest of the dining room, hoping to find him

waiting for me alone. The place was almost full- the Spaniards had just made us- but there was no sign of Melvin or any of his family. Loneliness struck me with a force of weakness.

I wandered behind Charity-Anna, too lazy to pretend to listen.

We arrived so late that everyone was already at our table. I avoided the empty chair next to Buddy in favor of Jeannette. Dimly, I noticed that Buddy was gently

holding Charity-Anna's chair, his face lit up.

Jeannette asked a few quiet questions about the Macbeth paper, which I answered as naturally as I breathed down in pain. He even invited me to join him tonight, and now it is clear that something is distracting me.

When- I entered the biology major and saw his empty seat, I realized that I was holding on to extreme hope and felt a new wave of disappointment.

The rest of the day passed slowly and sadly. In the gym, we had a lesson about the rules of badminton, and this was the gun they had for me. But at least it means I must sit and listen for a cross-field block. The best part is that the coaching is not done, so I will have another day tomorrow. But the next day he would never arm me with a net and deliver me to the rest of the race.

I am glad to be off campus, so I am free to pout and moan before

I leave tonight with Charity-Anna et al. But as I walked behind Charlie's door, Charity-Anna called to cancel our plans. I tried to be happy that Buddy asked her to dinner. I was relieved to finally be seen popping up - but the excitement sounded fake to my ears. She rescheduled our shopping trip for tomorrow night.

It gives almost no disturbances. I had kipper for lunch, salad and bread left over from the night before, so there was nothing to do there. I spent half an hour on my

homework, but then I finished it too. I settled my email backlog of my mother's letters and became increasingly clever as they progressed to the present. I sighed and typed quickly.

Mom, I am sorry. Already about I am. I went to the beach with a few friends. I had to author a dissertation.

My excuse was pathetic, so I gave up.

Today it is extra sunny - I know, I am too shocked - so I am

going out there and vitamin D as much as possible. I love you

Lilla- I decided to kill the Hour with a non- school- related lesson. I have a small collection of books that come with me to the Fox, and one of the most finished is the illustrated work of John Austen. I chose one, and walked towards the backyard, flicking a towel from the closet at the top of the stairs.

In the small area of Charlie's square, I put a blanket in the middle, and I put it on the happy

grass from the shade of the trees, which is always a little damp, although the sun shines for a long time. I lay on my stomach as I crossed my ankles in the air, flipping through the different stories in the book to see which one would hold my mind the most. My favorites are Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility. I recently read the first book, so I started reading Sense and Sensibility. Only after reading the third book did, I remember that the first story happens to be named

Melvin. I turned indignantly to Mansfield Park, but the prime minister of that article was named Edmund, who was too close. Was there no other name at the end of the eighteenth century? I closed the book and rolled in anger. I pushed up my sleeves and closed my eyes. Just think about the heat of the skin, I tell myself harshly. The breeze is still light, but it tickles my face. I pulled out all my hair over my head, spread my shawl over my head, and once more the ardor fell upon my eyelids,

my cheeks, my nose, my lips, my arms, and my neck through a light coat.

The next thing I realized was the versatile sound of Charlie's brick lane cruiser. I sat down in a daze, seeing that the lights were gone, and slept behind a tree. I looked around, confused, and suddenly felt that I was not alone.

'Charlie?' I asked. But I could hear his front door slam shut.

He jumped up, foolishly impatient, and picked up the now

wet cloak and the book. I ran into the stove to heat the oil and realized that dinner would be late. When I came in, Charlie was putting on his belt and getting out of his boots.

'I am sorry dad; dinner is not ready - I slept outside. I yawned.

'Don't worry,' he said. 'I want to find out about the game anyway.'

I watched TV with Charlie after dinner, looking for something to do. I did not want to watch anything, but he knew that I did not like

Kickball, that I had turned into some non- brainy sitcom that neither of us liked. He still seemed happy to do something together, even though I was down, good for him He feels happy to do it. He promises to cook, you want to pick me... do you think if I am with them?'

'Charity-Anna Benddover?' And he spoke.

'Graciela Yang.' 'I groaned when I told him the details. He was confused. 'But you are not going to dance? 'No, Father, but help me find

their clothes - you know to give them constructive criticism.' 'I do not have to explain this to the woman.

'Oh well. 'He seemed to know that he was doing something with the girls outside of his farm.' School was at night, though. '

Leave after school and come back in the morning.' Are you okay with dinner?'

I was feeding the Bellas seventeen years ago before you came here,' he reminded me.

'I don't know how they survived,' I murmured, then added more clearly, 'I will put a sliced sandwich in something cold. Is it okay, okay? Like above.'

The morning was sunny again. I awoke with new hope and tried to hold back my grimace. For the weather I wore a navy- blue V-neck shirt, this was a hard winter in Phoenix. I had planned my arrival at school so that I hardly had time for class, I flew around in a depressed mood looking for an empty seat, even

a silver Volvo, which does not seem to be parked in the last row, spoke in English. He arrived in haste, panting for the last Lily, but in a soft voice,

just like yesterday - I just could not stop the little hope that was sprouting in my head, I just got carried away and looked for restaurants in vain. He sat at the empty biology table.

Tonight, Big Sur kicks off the program once again, and since John has other commitments and has become more attractive. I hurried

out of town to stop looking and hoped to see him pop in. I swear I will be in a good mood tonight, and Jeannette or Jay Aguilar will not spoil the fun of finding clothes. I can even get some clothes. I do not want to think I am the only one shopping. In Altoona this weekend, no more in the earlier interests, it certainly will not be without at least telling me Cancelled.

After school, Charity-Anna followed me home in her old white Mercury so I could drop off the books

and the car. While I was inside, I quickly let down my hair, and since I felt slightly excited about leaving the fox, I left a note for Charlie on the table, explained again where dinner was and changed my purse from a school bag to one, I rarely used. and we ran together with Jay Aguilar, then we came to Jeannette's house, who was waiting for us my excitement increased when we drove out of the city.